SOCIAL VISIONS

Essays on

Swift, Meredith, Conrad, Sillitoe, Kundera, Singer

by Michael Wilding

'*Social Visions* as a whole ought to be required reading for anyone wishing to think seriously about the important traditions of political fiction.'
– John Lucas, *Times Literary Supplement.*

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The Midlands and Leaving Them

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Contents

Note on References vi
Preface: Basics of a Radical Criticism 1
The Politics of *Gulliver's Travels* 3
Meredith's *Beauchamp's Career:* Politics, Realism and Romance 29
Heart of Darkness: Conrad's Critique of Imperialism 56
The Politics of Conrad's *Nostromo* 77
Alan Sillitoe's Political Novels 95
Sexual Politics in Kundera's *The Joke* 140
Isaac Singer's Stories 164
Appendix: Fiction as a Political Vehicle 176
Bibliography 192

Note on references

Page references following quotations are to editions specified in the bibliography. For the convenience of readers using different editions of the novels discussed, chapter references and where applicable part or volume references are also given. Hence (1.2;34) means Part or Volume I, chapter 2, page 34 of the editions specified; (5;67-8) means chapter 5, pages 67-8 of the edition specified.

Preface: Basics of a Radical Criticism

Social Visions is concerned with the ways novelists deal with issues of society and politics. It is an attempt to restore the political dimensions to the reading of both 'classic' and contemporary authors and to explore the formal strategies evolved by writers committed to a vision of society. The social role of literary criticism, as institutionalized by the educational apparatus, has been to absorb literary works into the dominant ideology, to reconstitute by 'interpretation' these works' components into forms expressing, or not disturbing, the dominant ideology; and to exclude from the accepted canon of 'texts' works that cannot be so absorbed. A radical criticism has as its task the undoing of this false structure by re-emphasising the problematic socio-political features of works accorded classic status, and by restoring excluded works to attention, opening up the area of discourse of literary studies. Insofar as literary works embody and illuminate socio-political issues, they are part of an ongoing and unceasing ideological debate, and they are enlisted as evidence for now this position, now that position, sometimes explicitly, sometimes covertly. To object to the multiplication of readings, of interpretations, is futile, this is all part of literature; to try to fix *the* reading as a single final and immutable reading of a text is to be mystified by the reifications of commodity production, to see the printed book as an object of finality, rather than as part of a communication process. Reading a novel is an individual, isolated activity; but it naturally issues in the social activity of discussion. To talk about, to discuss, to interpret, to argue about a literary work is part of the experience of the literary work. Literature is part of a consciousness battle, not only in what the writer writes and the sources and influences he absorbs, but in the uses and interpretations made of the work by readers and critics. The critical disputes may at times seem as remote and absurd as the disputes Swift records in *Gulliver's Travels* about whether high or low heels should be worn or whether eggs should be broken at the big or little end; but these

absurdities, it is essential to realize, were Swift's rewriting of the political, social and economic conflicts of the English Revolution; the reduction of them to trivia was the ideology of the Augustan ruling elite, attempting to depoliticize the events of recent history, to discredit sectarian, radical commitment. So thoroughly, indeed, was the depoliticization achieved that the political nature of *Gulliver's Travels* can be lost and Fredric Jameson writes in *The Prison House of Language* of Swift's 'relatively metaphysical vision' in opposition to 'analogous literary techniques of defamiliarization ... being put to rather different political and social ends' by his European contemporaries. (56) The restoration of the political and social meanings of the work of classic authors is a necessary role for a radical criticism, retrieving them from the realms of the purely 'metaphysical' or abstractly 'literary' and resituating them in the context of specific thinking on society and politics, revealing the repressed radical components of their fiction and the ways in which the implications of these components are confronted, displaced or evaded. Swift, Meredith and Conrad are here looked at in this regard. But equally important is the restoration of an authentic radical tradition, the necessary project of redrawing the map of fictional possibility. In the context of a resurgence of formalism, a reassertion of a radical socio-political reading is required; since formalist approaches come to the fore in times of political reaction and conservatism, the reassertion is doubly important. The critical denial of the socio-political is a repression expressive, enactive and reinforcive of social repression. The redirection of attention to the social and political meanings of literary texts has been done before and will have to be done again; it is something that needs continually to be restated, against the persistent attempts to deny it.

The essays collected here have been written over a number of years for a variety of occasions and publications. Acknowledgement is given to the following publications in which the material first appeared: *Arts; A (Critical) Ninth Assembling*, ed. Richard Kostelanetz; *Cunning Exiles*, ed. Don Anderson and Stephen Knight; *Essays in Criticism; London Review of Books; Studies in the Eighteenth Century* - II, ed. R. F. Brissenden; *Sydney Studies in English*; *Journal of Australian Political Economy.*

The Politics of *Gulliver's Travels*

In his first three travels Gulliver never encounters primitive peoples. The only people he communicates with or spends time with are all members of highly developed societies. They are all political societies.

From the beginning Gulliver's presence in Lilliput presents political problems and he becomes the focus of political intrigue: 'It seems that upon the first Moment I was discovered sleeping on the Ground after my Landing, the Emperor had early Notice of it by an Express: and determined in Council that I should be tyed in the Manner I have related ... ' (I.l; 10). The immediate notification of Gulliver's arrival to the King, the summoning of a council, stress the fact that Lilliput is from our first encounter with it to be envisaged as a political world. The political events and political practices of Lilliput have been related to the political history of England during 1708-1715 by Firth, Case and others. But the power of the book is not just restricted to these particular political allusions: the general satire of the methods of promotion to ministerial office in Lilliput is parodic of the attitude of mind behind and nature of such procedures in any political society.

When a great Office is vacant, either by Death or Disgrace, (which often happens) five or six of those Candidates petition the Emperor to entertain his Majesty and the Court with a Dance on the Rope; and whoever jumps the highest without falling, succeeds in the Office. (1.3; 22)

The absurdity and valuelessness of these methods, their total irrelevance to the requirements of public life and their inherent ridiculousness, are not restricted to any specific historical time or place.

Yet allied with such absurd comedy in the manner of appointment is the evil that the appointed can go on to practise - something again

not limited to the practices of early eighteenth-century England. When Gulliver falls from favour for refusing to gratify the King's desire for absolute domination over Blefuscu by the capture of their fleet, the Council hold long discussions about whether to poison, starve or merely blind him. The cruelty of Lilliputians in power is something that is as strongly established as the absurdity of their methods of gaining power. The moral point is stressed by these discrepancies in mode: the absurd office-getting like absurd electioneering or party conferences is the material of comedy; but comic abilities do not suit their possessors for the realities of political life, and the decisions they come up with and the behaviour they manifest takes us into the realms of the hideously brutal maintenance of power, the real iron heel of the society. The way the Lilliputians warp between being a comic flea-circus and a chamber of horrors is a mark of the duplicity, the dubiousness, the duality of their nature, which is a political nature.

And for all the general quality of his satire, its endurability, its continual relevance to human behaviour, Jonathan Swift was certainly not hiding behind a non-engaged, non-specific mode. He explicitly refers to the detail of English life, the immediate history of the English Revolution whose turbulent forces are still present for Swift. The same qualities of absurd methods of appointment to office allied with a great appetite for extending power and exercising it with cruelty are shown in the account of English public life that Gulliver gives to the King of Brobdingnag. The King

‘was perfectly astonished with the historical Account I gave him of our Affairs during the last Century; protesting it was only an heap of Conspiracies, Rebellions, Murders, Massacres, Revolutions, Banishments; the very worst Effects that Avarice, Faction, Hypocrisy, Perfidiousness, Cruelty, Rage, Madness, Hatred, Envy, Lust, Malice, and Ambition could produce.’ (II.6; 116)

And he tells Gulliver that

You have clearly proved that Ignorance, Idleness and Vice are the proper Ingredients for qualifying a Legislator. That Laws are best explained, interpreted, and applied by those whose Interest

and Abilities lie in perverting, confounding, and eluding them ... It doth not appear from all you have said, how any one Perfection is required towards the Procurement of any one Station among you; much less that Men are ennobled on Account of their Virtue, that Priests are advanced for their Piety or Learning, Soldiers for their Conduct or Valour, Judges for their Integrity, Senators for the Love of their Country, or Counsellors for their Wisdom. (II.6; 116)

Swift's concern here is mainly with the corruption of the officers and offices of public life. He has established this in Gulliver's statements, and in the dramatised behaviour of the public figures of Lilli put. But although this is a comment on political activity, it is not really a political statement. Given the absurdities and corruptions, accepting all that, we can move on to a number of differing political conclusions. We can conclude that political action is hopeless, because power corrupts, because men in power are absurd and evil; we can conclude that we need moral, upright men in political positions; we can conclude that a correct belief will prosper whatever the corruptions of the political operatives; or we can conclude that there is no absolute truth, and that the people who profess the knowledge of an absolute truth in a political programme are merely subscribing to an ideology that serves as a cloak for personal ambitions, that represents their own economic and social aspirations.

The conclusion we come to will depend on what weight and interpretation Swift puts on political parties, on ideologies. His attitude towards them is given clearly in his account of the role of political ideologies and political parties in both the domestic and foreign affairs of Lilliput. Internally Lilliput is divided between 'two struggling Parties ... under the Names of Tramecksan, and Slamecksan, from the high and low Heels on their Shoes, by which they distinguish themselves' (1.4; 32). The implication - or proclamation, rather, for Swift is not being over delicately subtle - is that this differing height of their heels is all that distinguishes them. At the same time as there are these internal divisions, Lilliput is at war with Blefuscu over the issue of which end to break eggs - the traditional way of breaking them at the larger end was proscribed in Lilliput after the present king's grandfather cut his finger when breaking the big end as a child. As a result of the Lilliputians'

resentment of the order to break only the smaller end of their eggs

there have been six Rebellions raised on that Account; wherein one Emperor lost his Life, and another his Crown. These civil Commotions were constantly fomented by the Monarchs of *Blefuscu;* and when they were quelled, the Exiles always fled for Refuge to that Empire. It is computed, that eleven Thousand Persons have, at several Times, suffered Death, rather than submit to break their Eggs at the smaller End ... (1.4; 33)

What Swift is saying here is that the political ideologies motivating political action are as absurd as he has already shown the officers and offices of political life to be. Certainly this is satire, and caricature and absurdity are methods of satire; certainly the low and high heels, the big and little endians, represent specific political issues in England. But Swift is not merely using the manner of satire, adopting the appropriate decorum and so denoting serious matters by burlesque terms and concepts. He is questioning that any of the issues he deals with are serious, by comparing them to issues of the height of heels, or the end on which to break an egg. The huge disproportion between the triviality of those issues and their consequences in terms of political actions - involving death, rebellion, exile - express a huge contempt for the political. For Swift political confrontations are reducible to such absurdities: indeed, he would not think there was any reduction involved. This is the stature of political causes. Issues of class, of economic power, of parliamentary representation, of constitutional rights, of governmental responsibility have no place in this confrontation 'during which Time we have lost Forty Capital Ships, and a much greater Number of smaller Vessels, together with thirty thousand of our best Seamen and Soldiers; and the Damage received by the Enemy is reckoned to be somewhat greater than ours' (1.4; 34). Swift presents it merely as the clash of two absurd, intransigent sides each trying to foist their absurd doctrines on to everyone else, each attempting the total domination of society. The particular causes, the particular beliefs, are not presented as having any serious foundations.

When absurd beliefs are allied with corrupt political practitioners and ridiculous methods of appointing and selecting statesmen, the total account is one of unmitigated hostility towards the political

world, towards political commitment, towards the assumption that there is any value in any political position. The reported views of the King of Brobdingnag offer a contemptuous dismissal of the political realm, and a strong advocacy of an alternative. The king

> gave it for his Opinion; that whoever could make two Ears of Com, or two Blades of Grass to grow upon a Spot of Ground where only one grew before; would deserve better of Mankind, and do more essential Service to his Country, than the whole Race of Politicians put together. (II.7; 119-20)

But his statement does not go on to recommend the abolition of all political structures, and a vision of decentralized, corn-growing communities. Kings, cabinets, legislation are accepted as facts. The judgements are all against the delusions and corruptions of the politicians and leaders; and against, too, the 'rabble'. The king' s rejection is of the immorality of the practitioners and the triviality of the issues - it is not a rejection of the political structure of the society. That political structure is never questioned.

It is Swift's assumption that such an economic, agricultural change could be achieved apolitically - and have no political consequences. So entrenched is his conservatism that conservatism for him is *the way things by nature are* (or should be) and agricultural change can simply be fitted into this system without changing the system. But his conservatism is not as static as it purports to be. It is also a response to a fear, a threat. Politicians are ambitious and corrupt but at least they generally come from the 'natural leaders'; but the way things are can be disrupted by the activities of the people - in particular by the activist element of the people, which Swift chooses to call the 'rabble'. The 'rabble' are the 'common people', the workers that a member of the gentry meets with consequences discomforting for the member of the gentry. Swift presents them as mindless, violent, hostile, disruptive - and hence potentially riotous and hence rebellious. When Gulliver is in the temple in Lilliput he was

> left with a strong Guard, to prevent the Impertinence, and probably the Malice of the Rabble, who were very impatient to crowd about me as near as they durst; and some of them had the

Impudence to shoot their Arrows at me as I sate on the Ground by the Door of my House. (I.2; 15)

Swift's fear, shared with all his class and revealed clearly in this paranoid fantasy, is that one day he'll go out in the street and the rabble will be crushing him in a mob charge, or firing at him from the roofs and from round corners; the class war will have begun in earnest, and will not be merely a matter of impoliteness, surliness and such like. The fear is there, but it is depoliticized by turning the hostile class into a rude rabble - presenting their behaviour as social impoliteness, spots on the perfect fabric of immutable design- rather than seeing them as wanting a different design. The fear can be repressed. It is a problem of rudeness, crudeness, rather than of political control. And when the rudeness gets out of hand, its political basis is denied so totally that even the question about whether the rabble might have a political basis cannot be asked. The rabble is a mindless mob, it has to be. Its ideas are not deemed worthy of notice. Swift never has Gulliver talk politics to any of the rabble. In every voyage Gulliver talks to the king or the authority figure, and discusses with the rulers how society is run. It is never looked at from the point of view of the ruled. Having presented the delusions and corruptions of the leaders, the ambitious politicians, Swift finds nothing better in the led. His conservatism denies that conservatism is an ideology, and rejects all other ideologies as examples of absurdity and triviality in belief and behaviour. There cannot be any serious political theory- other than the conservatism which isn't considered a theory but an account of the way things naturally are (or should be).

This is the picture Swift paints of the political life. From here he can develop various further positions. One would be an attitude of utter rejection, and Swift has often enough been thought of- notably in Leavis's influential essay- as utterly negative, as rejecting the world, life, humanity. Negative rejection is the state Swift puts Gulliver in with regard to mankind at the end of Book IV. But although withdrawal and rejection are certainly possibilities considered in *Gulliver's Travels,* Swift also considers certain positive political attitudes.

Having made a diagnosis so fearful, the repressive imposition of order merely for the sake of order can seem appealing in the face of the impending chaos. It is not, however, something Swift advocates.

It is not true to say, as George Orwell wrote, that Swift's 'political aims were on the whole reactionary ones' (IV.57; 257). Reactionary power, absolute authority, comes off badly in *Gulliver's Travels.* The king of Lilliput, when Gulliver has prevented an invasion from Blefuscu by capturing their fleet, develops absolutist ambitions. He

> desired I would make some other Opportunity of bringing all the rest of his Enemy's Ships into his Ports. And so unmeasurable is the Ambition of Princes, that he seemed to think of nothing less than reducing the whole Empire of *Blefuscu* into a Province, and governing it by a Viceroy; of destroying the *Big-Endian* Exiles, and compelling that People to break the smaller End of their Eggs; by which he would remain sole Monarch of the whole World. But I endeavoured to divert him from his Design, by many Arguments drawn from the Topicks of Policy as well as Justice; And I plainly protested, that I would never be an Instrument of bringing a free and brave People into Slavery: And when the Matter was debated in Council, the wisest Part of the Ministry were of my Opinion. This open bold Declaration of mine was so opposite to the Schemes and Politicks of his Imperial Majesty, that he could never forgive me ... (I.5; 37)

In Brobdingnag, of course, the situation is reversed. Here Gulliver advocates to the horror of the king the marvels of gunpowder 'that would have made him absolute Master of the Lives, the Liberties, and the Fortunes of his People' (II.7; 119).

For all his presenting political issues and political ambitions as petty, trivial and comic, in his opposition to absolutism Swift is utterly serious. His turning away from the political arena in mocking despair is not his final attitude. His conservatism is opposed to absolutism as well as to any democracy or egalitarianism. Swift's opposition to absolutism depends on his acceptance of the theory of the mixed monarchy - the theory that the three estates of the realm - kings, nobles and commons - were of equal importance and of equal natural foundation in the state. Z. S. Fink has shown how this is expressed in the course of the political discussions with the king of Brobdingnag. At the end of the discussions, Gulliver explains the existence of a militia of citizens (also called the King's army) - a sort of permanent reserve army

made up of tradesmen in the several cities, and farmers in the country, whose commanders are only the nobility and gentry, without pay or reward ...
I was curious to know how this Prince, to whose Dominions there is no Access from any other Country, came to think of Armies, or to teach his People the Practice of military Discipline. But I was soon informed, both by Conversation, and Reading their Histories. For, in the Course of many Ages they have been troubled with the same Disease, to which the whole Race of Mankind is subject; the Nobility often contending for Power, the People for Liberty, and the King for absolute Dominion. All which, however happily tempered by the Laws of the Kingdom, have been sometimes violated by each of the three Parties; and have more than once occasioned Civil Wars, the last whereof was happily put an end to by this Prince's Grandfather in a general Composition; and the Militia then settled with Common Consent hath been ever since kept in the strictest Duty. (11.7; 121-2)

Here Swift has abandoned his presentation of all political interest as being absurd, corrupt or criminal. Here he presents the three estates as having their three, independent class interests. Certainly he refers to this as a 'disease' - with perhaps the implication that it is something nasty that has been caught and that might be cured and that certainly should be tried to be cured. But nonetheless, this is an analysis of political interest, of competing interests, this is a recognition closer to realities than anything we have been offered up till this point. This gives politics a far more serious role than the superficial cavortings of the Lilliputians, or than Gulliver's account of the English to the king of Brobdingnag, would ever allow.

However, it is still not clear that Swift recognised his analysis of the three orders as political. He presents it not as a political theory, but rather as a fact about human nature - a matter of psychology or original sin; not something that much can really be done about. That Brobdingnag had experienced civil wars might have allowed for some political speculation. A radical thinker might, for instance, have argued that as long as a state has a hierarchical system with a monarchy and nobility there will always be civil wars. *The True Levellers Standard Advanced* (1649) of Gerard Winstanley and others declares

In the beginning of time, the great Creator, Reason, made the earth to be a common treasury, to preserve beasts, birds, fishes, and man, the lord that was to govern this creation. For man had domination given to him over the beasts, birds and fishes. But not one word was spoken in the beginning, that one branch of mankind should rule over another. (77)

But Swift has closed his ears to any communism or democratic republicanism. To him political theories are the absurdities of high and low heel and big and little end factionists, but the three social orders are innate. He never acknowledges that this vision of the three orders is but another hypothesis, another ideology. Although he offers a serious political analysis, he presents it not as a political theory; to do that would be to allow other people to present other political theories, and then the simple conservative unity would be demonstrably shattered. The validity of the conservative theory lies solely in its excluding all other theories as mere theories, and presenting itself as 'the way things are', and the 'natural order'. Swift presents his analysis not as a political theory but as a fact of human nature.

We might wonder why it is that Lilliput, Brobdingnag and Laputa all have social structures of the three orders. The expectations of satire might provide a partial explanation: we have to be offered societies whose structures are like those of the England that is being satirised. But the real explanation, I think, is that Swift believed that the three orders were innate to man. He finds it necessary to have Gulliver explain why there should be armies and war in Brobdingnag, when 'there is no Access from any other Country', but never sees it as problematic that in these isolated communities, societies of the three orders of king, nobles and people should always have developed...

The most radical critique of domestic political life offered in *Gulliver's Travels* is that voiced by the king of Brobdingnag. But the questions the king asks of Gulliver and the statements Gulliver gives make a moral critique of English political practice.

He asked, what Methods were used to cultivate the Minds and Bodies of our young Nobility; and in what kind of Business they commonly spent the first and teachable Part of their Lives. What

Course was taken to supply that Assembly, when any noble Family became extinct.
What Qualifications were necessary in those who are to be created new Lords: Whether the Humour of the Prince, a Sum of Money to a Court-Lady, or a Prime Minister; or a Design of strengthening a Party opposite to the publick Interest, ever happened to be Motives in those Advancements. What Share of the Knowledge these Lords had in the Laws of their Country, and how they came by it, so as to enable them to decide the Properties of their Fellow-Subjects in the last Resort, whether they were always so free from Avarice, Partialities, or Want, that a Bribe, or some other sinister View, could have no Place among them. (II.6; 113)

This is not a political critique of English political theory. The sorts of questions asked about educating the nobility and creating a new nobility, and the ensuing questions about the commons and bribing voters, accept as an implicit ideal the model of English political structures. There is no questioning at all about the principles of 'natural leaders', of a hereditary nobility with its political representation in the House of Lords: the only questions are about moral education and about the principles of creating new lords - unquestioningly accepting an aristocracy as a permanent social and political force. The king of Brobdingnag's political theory and the social organization of his state are an expression of the theory of the mixed monarchy; but it is not recognised as a theory that can be questioned or challenged. The questions and challenge relate to ethical behaviour within that system.

The most memorable treatment of the conflict of interests of the three estates or classes is that given in the account of the relationship of the flying island to the lands below it in Book Three. In recognizing the competing interests, Swift offers here an advocacy of a politics of compromise.

The King would be the most absolute Prince in the Universe, if he could but prevail on a Ministry to join with him; but these having their Estates below on the Continent, and considering that the Office of a Favourite hath a very uncertain Tenure, would never consent to the enslaving their Country.

If any Town should engage in Rebellion or Mutiny, fall into violent Factions, or refuse to pay the usual Tribute; the King hath two Methods of reducing them to Obedience. The first and the mildest Course is by keeping the Island hovering over such a Town ... But if they still continue obstinate, or offer to raise Insurrections; he proceeds to the last Remedy, by letting the Island drop directly upon their Heads, which makes a universal Destruction both of Houses and Men. However, this is an Extremity to which the Prince is seldom driven, neither indeed is he willing to put it in Execution; nor dare his Ministers advise him to an Action, which as it would render them odious to the People, so it would be a great Damage to their own Estates that lie all below; for the Island is the King's Demesn.
But there is still indeed a more weighty Reason ... the King, when he is highest provoked, and most determined to press a City to Rubbish, orders the Island to descend with great Gentleness, out of a Pretence of Tenderness to his People, but indeed for fear of breaking the Adamantine Bottom; in which case it is the Opinion of all their Philosophers, that the Loadstone could no longer hold it up, and the whole Mass would fall to the Ground. (III.3; 155-6)

There is, then, a limit on the exercise of power here. For if the king attempts to exercise absolute power by bringing down the full weight of the island to crush the people below he will damage the very instrument of his power. Similarly, the people are inhibited from too great an exercise of independence or rebelliousness for fear of the possibility of such an action. Neither side can win. It is a very neat fable for compromise.

It might be objected that the fable is of limited applicability, that the damage to the bottom of the island is something limiting the exercise of absolute power only in this rather exceptional community. But the fable is not dependent only on the mysterious qualities of the flying island. The ministers would never agree on such a policy since 'it would be a great Damage to their own Estates that lie all below'. Their wealth and power depend on the continued existence of the people to farm the estates. There can be no common cause between king and nobility, for the king's lands are all on the island; and if the nobility did agree to the destruction of their own estates beneath, they

would be dependent on the king's goodwill for their continuing economic support and 'the Office of a Favourite hath a very uncertain Tenure'. Any such alliance could only by temporary.

This separation of the nature of the king's estates and the aristocrats' estates is an interesting mystification. Swift clearly needs conceptually to separate monarchical power from aristocratic power. For his class structure he needs to present it as different in kind. He recognizes the economic base of aristocratic power - their landownings, farmed by the people, and producing rents from the people and consuming the peoples' surplus. But he needs to mystify the monarchy by obscuring that shared economic base. The king' s economic base has to be placed somewhere - and Swift recognizes that it, too, comes from landholding; but to make a separation from the aristocrats, Swift places the monarchical landholdings in the sky. The material base of kingship is made aerial and hence somehow divine, magical, mystic - not real, exploitative land-holding but a flying island. Monarchical authority isn't soiled by being based on real, earthy landholding, like aristocratic power.

The three interests of king, nobility and people that are stated in Book II, are in Laputa realised in fictional form. The concepts are dramatised in the imagery and events of the novel. And by the introduction of these concepts, we can see Book III as offering, for all its mystifications, an advance in political sophistication and analysis on Book I. With the recognition of inevitable conflicting interests, Swift both takes political behaviour more seriously than in Lilli put, and can offer some positive suggestions of compromise. We have been led, through a series of examples and discussions, to a deeper understanding. Swift has expressed a political philosophy of deterrents. He has taken us into the post-nuclear weapons world of mutually assured destruction that will benefit no one - so the ultimate threat can only be brandished around in a game of bluff. To use the flying island to crush a rebellion will at the same time as crushing the rebellion destroy the instrument of power, no one will win. If the authority of king and aristocrats is asserted in this ultimate way, there will be no people to do all the work for them; the people will have been exterminated in a massive act of genocide; the king and aristocrats will have to start digging the soil with their own hands so as not to starve. It is an unthinkable possibility.

Yet looked at in another way Swift's attitudes in Book III offer

little advance from Book I, and indeed are dependent on the judgements expressed in Books I and II on political activity. When political behaviour and activity have been summed up as absurd, comic, cruel, irrational and based on no theories or ideas, it is easy to advocate a compromise of the factions that confront each other. A scepticism about the value of every political position, a suspicion about every scheme that claims to offer a solution make the advocacy of compromise easy: there is no problem about surrendering a position for a compromise when no position is serious or worthwhile. This habit of mind makes it possible to accept the concept of a compromise between the three classes - even though Swift would, at the same time, deny that those three class positions were in any way political or to be identified with so called political and party confrontations. There is an Orwellian doublethink in operation here.

And so the political positions of the three classes of the state are not presented as deriving from theory or argument; they are given as inevitable, instinctual roles, not subject to thought or debate, not 'political'. If three groups are born as having different interests then there is an inevitability about competition and confrontation, and a need for compromise, and an impossibility that any one of them can be absolutely correct. Since this conflict is innate in society, no 'political' position, no party, can ever hope to gain total support, since it will always be cut across by these prior divisions of class interests. The competing interests of the three classes are presented as inevitable, as pre-existing and transcending any other issues. They embody all that can be said about class, authority, economics and property in an inflexible, non-dynamic way. The only political stance possible is to discourage factions, new beliefs, alternatives, further complications, and to try to reduce conflict down to the minimum - i.e., the three class interests - and then to try to reconcile the three positions into compromise. And it is compromise, not a tripartite pluralism, that is advocated. And it is to a compromise directed toward balance, stasis. There is no suggestion that a dynamic should emerge from the conflict. It is the very fear that such a dynamic might be generated that causes Swift's advocacy of compromise, his commitment to stasis. Who knows what might emerge if a dynamic was allowed to generate and things started changing? Yet his very theory of the mixed monarchy has built into it the idea of conflicting interests; he may wish them to be resolved into an internal harmony,

he may conceptually depoliticize these class interests and identify politics only with faction, but, as Irvin Ehrenpreis has pointed out, nonetheless 'he was admitting that the new age involved essentially conflicting interests within society, a fact inconsistent with his dislike of factions':

> Two massive expressions of social purpose were available to him- the first, 'an internal harmony among the parts of society'; the second, 'an equilibrium of conflicting interests'. Of these he preferred the old to the new. Refusing to adapt himself to the clash of dissenter against Anglican, financier against proprietor, or Whig against Tory, as more than a passing malady, Swift remained negatively oriented to the social forces of his time. (145)

His fear of the outbreak of radical anarchism and communism such as had been expressed and practiced in the 1640s and 1650s is apparent in his refusal to mention that such things ever were expressed or practised; all that was rabble noise, enthusiasm, fanaticism arising from sexual repression, arguments about the height of heels and the end on which to break an egg. He knew it was there; he denied it had any significant content.

Given the nature of *Gulliver's Travels* as travel book, imaginary voyage, multiple utopian speculation, a reader might well expect to meet in it at least one episode involving primitive people, noble savages, or unfallen creatures. And after the political societies of the first three books, the Houyhnhnms do at first appear to be unfallen, uncorrupt, rational, possibly ideal beings. They present themselves to Gulliver as having a society that does not need the corruptions of political life. 'Power, Government, War, Law, Punishment, and a Thousand other Things had no Terms, wherein that Language could express them; which made the Difficulty almost insuperable to give my Master any Conception of what I meant . . . ' (IV.4; 228). And after Gulliver has given his account of European society, his 'master' comments:

> That, our Institutions of *Government* and *Law* were plainly owing to our gross Defects in *Reason,* and by consequence, in *Virtue;* because *Reason* alone is sufficient to govern a *Rational* Creature. (IV.7; 243)

After the succession of political activities that the preceding books have presented, we are in as ready a state as Gulliver is to welcome a society that can operate without politics, with neither parties nor institutions nor competing social orders. But the realities of the Houyhnhnm society do not accord with the official account. The Houyhnhnms have no words for 'Power, Government' and so on which makes it difficult for Gulliver to talk to his 'Master'; but they clearly have the concepts of authority and rule, for one of them is in the role of 'Master' to Gulliver, and reason 'governs' rational creatures in their view. The contradiction, firmly established by Swift, is left implicit. It is not a contradiction that Gulliver is willing to recognize. Gulliver is mystified by the seemingly different surface of the society. No king, no upper house, it must be different. But for all the lack of political vocabulary, the society most definitely has its social structures and political institutions. There are masters and servants amongst the Houyhnhnms: white, sorrel and iron-gray horses fulfil different social roles within a hierarchy. The quarternial 'Representative Council of the whole Nation' (IV.8; 254) is, indeed, no other than a parliament, and Gulliver's 'Master' who attends it 'as the Representative of our District' (IV.9;255) is no other than a member of parliament. Even if they don't have a king or upper house, the Houyhnhnms are still political; getting rid of kings and aristocrats, Swift is assuring us, won't save you from politics; so why not keep the kings and natural rulers? Without them the advantages of harmonious equilibrium are lost and an absolutism or totalitarianism is bound to emerge from the removal of these qualifying forces.

Though the Houyhnhnm society may seem superior to European society in its lack of political corruptions, absurdities of party and ideology, and competing interest groups, it achieves this apparent superiority only by a certain deliberate mystification, a pretence that its politics aren't political; and at the expense of certain freedoms. In the course of the preceding books Swift's belief in the mixed monarchy has become clearer. It is a doctrine of compromise, of course, and because of that the apparent clarity and singleness of the Houyhnhnms' rationality might seem appealing; but the virtues of political compromise, of the adjustable balances, have emerged in contrast with ambitions of the various parties and social orders to have their own beliefs and interests adopted with a singleness of purpose that represses all alternatives. Just such an absolutism

has been achieved in Houyhnhnm society. Orwell indicated the totalitarian nature of this society but without recognizing that Swift had established in the preceding books the means for a critique and rejection of it. Orwell argued that Swift endorses the society of the Houyhnhnms and presents them as a positive utopia. But mistaken as his interpretation of Swift's position is, he gives an incisive account of the repressive nature of the Houyhnhnm society that cannot be bettered.

In a society in which there is no law, and in theory no compulsion, the only arbiter of behaviour is public opinion. But public opinion, because of the tremendous urge to conformity in gregarious animals, is less tolerant than any system of law. When human beings are governed by 'thou shalt not', the individual can practice a certain amount of eccentricity: when they are supposedly governed by 'love' or 'reason', he is under continuous pressure to make him behave and think in exactly the same way as everyone else. The Houyhnhnms, we are told, were unanimous on almost all subjects. The only question they ever *discussed* was how to deal with the Yahoos. Otherwise there was no room for disagreement among them, because the truth is always either self-evident, or else it is undiscoverable and unimportant. They had apparently no word for 'opinion' in their language, and in their conversations there was no 'difference of sentiments.' They had reached, in fact, the highest stage of totalitarian organization, the stage when a conformity has become so general that there is no need for a police force. (IV.57; 252)

The closed nature of the society, the unawareness of other possibilities is given a fine underlining just before Gulliver leaves. Standing on a height he sees what appears to be a small island, and confirms this by looking through his spyglass. 'But it appeared to the Sorrel Nag to be only a blue Cloud: For, as he had no Conception of any Country beside his own, so he could not be as expert in distinguishing remote Objects at Sea, as we who so much converse in that Element' (IV.10; 265). This is not only a reminder of the Houyhnhnms' lack of vocabulary and lack of concepts: it relates too to their overall political philosophy, the sorrel nag's having 'no conception of any Country besides his own'. The political insights of

Gulliver's Travels come largely from Swift's having such various conceptions of other countries, of being able to illuminate the political nature of his own society by comparison with other countries and the conceptions of hypothetical countries, of utopias and anti-utopias. But the Houyhnhnm sees not another country, not another island. but a blue cloud, rather than face up to the proper explanation which would upset his world picture - which would allow other possibilities, other worlds, potential differences of interpretation, opinion.

Orwell indicated the non-institutional aspects of the political form of Houyhnhnm society. But there are political institutions too. The parliamentary nature of the quaternial general assembly is made clear in the topics discussed; in addition to redistributing foodstuffs, they had 'their old Debate, and indeed, the only Debate that ever happened in their country - Whether the *Yahoos* should be exterminated from the Face of the Earth' (IV.9; 255). And with the abruptness of the introduction of the issue, and the extremeness of its formulation, it is inescapably stressed that like all other societies encountered, that of the Houyhnhnms is equally political.

The nature of the proposed extermination cannot be defined until the nature of the Yahoos is defined. Our judgement of the event will be different depending upon whether we see the Yahoos as domestic animals, or as subservient human beings. The ambiguity about the Yahoos is of course basic to the satiric effects Swift achieves. That they seem indeterminately men and beasts is in itself a comment on human motivations and activities: their sexuality and their hoarding of 'certain shining Stones'(IV.7; 244) are particularly presented in this way to illuminate the 'bestial' or irrational aspects of European society looked at from Swift's upper-class 'natural leader' Christianity.

But to understand the political issues we need to explore the ambiguities. Is Swift offering us here a comparable reversal to that of the first two books with its big and little men? Horses and men in reversed roles, so that the Yahoos are in this context animals. Or are the Yahoos essentially human beings who are treated as animals?

One of the suggestions in the debate about exterminating the Yahoos, is that 'the *Houyhnhnms* should be *exhorted* to cultivate the Breed of Asses, which, as they are in all respects more valuable Brutes; so they have this Advantage, to be fit for Service at five

Years old, which the others are not till Twelve' (IV.9; 257). That there are asses to carry out the functions of beasts of burden indicates that the Yahoos are not to be seen simply as the equivalent of horses in Europe for this Houyhnhnm society. By removing them from their beast of burden role, the society would not necessarily be disrupted; there are asses to fill their niche. The possibility is that the Yahoos are not in any necessary or appropriate role in the Houyhnhnm society. That they are treated as humans treat animals may tell us more about the people who treat them that way, than about their true nature.

Swift creates for *A Modest Proposal* (1729) a writer who is able to suggest using the Irish children as animals for food and skins; he talks about human population in terms of farming - 'a Child, *just dropt from its Dam'*, 'Two hundred Thousand Couple whose Wives are Breeders'. By thinking of humans as animals, they can be treated as animals The Houyhnhnms think of the Yahoos as animals, propose exterminating them as animals, skin them for Gulliver's canoe.

But what if the Yahoos are not animals? Their similarity to Gulliver is stressed. Commentators tend to indicate how this emphasises the bestiality and depravity of mankind, taking their cue from Gulliver's reactions; but the comparison works from the opposite direction. The Houyhnhnms are concerned to keep the Yahoos bestial, as animals; but if indeed the Yahoos are like Gulliver, then the possibility of educating them, of civilizing them exists. Now such an education is an ambivalent issue: on the one hand it might be argued there is no point in educating the Yahoos for they would simply be brought to the state of fallen man and man is debased and fallen. That is the conservative pessimistic view - the easiest because it involves doing nothing, just carry on as things are, don't build schools, keep on exploiting the Yahoos. To educate the Yahoos would simply be to give them a European sophistication in their beastliness. But behind this cynical, conservative rejection of the idea of educating them, is the fear that if the Yahoos were educated they would begin to alter the way society is. We can't afford to educate the people, they'd never put up with the system if they knew enough to know how to alter it.

Now the possibility that the Yahoos are educable is built into the book - but resisted as a political conclusion; who would do all the dirty work if that happened? It is a possibility Swift builds into his narrative - and then realizing with horror that it is possible, he

restores the stress on the beastliness of the Yahoos.

Yet, debased as European man is presented to be, he is certainly less debased, less bestial than the Yahoos. The importance of the kindness of Don Pedro, the Portuguese captain who rescues Gulliver from the open sea after he has been forced to leave the land of the Houyhnhnms, is that it contrasts both with the cold rationality of the Houyhnhnms and with the bestiality of the Yahoos - one of whom in Gulliver's eyes Don Pedro appears to be: 'I wondered to find such Civilities from a Yahoo' (IV.11; 270).

Perhaps the Yahoos could achieve such civilities. This would certainly seem likely if the traditional account of their origin is correct. The story is that

> the two *Yahoos* said to be first seen among them, had been driven thither over the Sea; that coming to Land, and being forsaken by their Companions, they retired to the Mountains, and degenerating by Degrees, became in Process of Time, much more savage than those of their own Species in the Country from whence these two Originals came. (IV.9; 256)

The fact that Gulliver who also arrives by sea does not degenerate but abhors the behaviour of the Yahoos is an argument for the possibility for the rehabilitation of the Yahoos. Man has a potential for degeneration as the Yahoos show; but this degeneration is insisted on, and desired as an irremediable, permanent state for the Yahoos, by the Houyhnhnms. It would not suit the Houyhnhnms if the Yahoos were civilised and educated.

And once we realise that the Houyhnhnmns economically need the suppressed beast class of the Yahoos, then we realise that the Yahoos could very easily become educated, but it is against everyone's interests from the group in control that such an education or a civilization should occur. The 'rabble' is a creation of the upper classes; they have to keep the rabble illiterate and frustrated and violent, because if it were educated, it would refuse to accept the social structure the upper classes have created. Yahoo-like behaviour is a direct and inevitable consequence of keeping a class in economic and social subjection. Gulliver has to be expelled because he presents a threat to the security of the Houyhnhnms' society. And it is essentially a political threat. Because he has not degenerated into

brutish illiteracy, mindless bestiality, he is a Yahoo who can think, who can still reason; he has to be got rid of before he sees what is really going on and then starts a slave revolt amongst the Yahoos. Gulliver is told by his 'Master':

That in the last general Assembly, when the Affair of the *Yahoos* was entered upon, the Representatives had taken Offence at his keeping a *Yahoo* (meaning myself) in his Family more like a *Houyhnhnm* than a Brute Animal. That, he was known frequently to converse with me, as if he could receive some Advantage or Pleasure in my Company: That, such a Practice was not agreeable to Reason or Nature, or a thing ever heard of before among them. The Assembly did therefore *exhort* him, either to employ me like the rest of my Species, or command me to swim back to the Place from whence I came. That, the first of these Expedients was utterly rejected by all the *Houyhnhnms*, who had ever seen me at his House or their own: For, they alleged, That because I had some Rudiments of Reason, added to the natural Pravity of those Animals, it was to be feared, I might be able to seduce them in Troops by Night to destroy the *Houyhnhnms* Cattle, as being naturally of the ravenous Kind, and Averse from Labour. (IV.10; 263)

The Houyhnhnms, then, are very worried about the breakdown in segregation resulting from the way Gulliver is treated by his 'master', and they fear a slave revolt; they fear that Gulliver will lead an insurrection that will threaten their property and withdraw their slave labour. Gulliver has to be expelled for fear he will subvert the whole order of Houyhnhnm society. The rationality, order, social stability of the Houyhnhnms is founded on the existence of a subjugated people that they treat as animals.

The treatment of the Yahoos as animals encourages us to accept them as animals; they draw sledges, they are killed for their skins and tallow, but in his physical descriptions of them Swift emphasises their humanity. When Gulliver's master unties one of them from the stable to show Gulliver, Gulliver recoils with horror:

My Horror and Astonishment are not to be described, when I observed, in this abominable Animal, a perfect human Figure; the

Face of it indeed was flat and broad, the Nose depressed, the Lips large, and the Mouth wide: but these Differences are common to all savage Nations, where the Lineaments of the Countenance are distorted by the Natives suffering their Infants to lie grovelling on the Earth, or by carrying them on their Backs, nuzzling with their Face against the Mother's Shoulders. The Fore-feet of the *Yahoo* differed from my Hands in nothing else, but the Length of the Nails, the Coarseness and Brownness of the Palms, and the Hairiness on the Backs. (IV.2; 213-14)

In his description of them, Swift gives the Yahoos markedly African features. The effect of this is not to suggest Africans are more debased, nearer to the bestiality of the Yahoos; but to present the Houyhnhnm society as a type of a colonial, or slave-owning, society. The Augustan rationality of the Houyhnhnms is founded on a system of slavery, just as Britain's attempts at those Augustan values had an economic foundation in the African slaves working on the West Indian plantations. The society of reason is based economically on the exploitation of a people who are denied reason.

There are both probing radicalisms, and protective evasions in Swift's portrayal of the Yahoos. He is certainly exposing exploitation; but he is also externalising it, distancing it from events *within* England or Ireland. His description of the Yahoos has led to seeing them as racially denoted - not a class from the same race as their oppressors. Swift is avoiding dealing with the class war in England or Ireland. He presents a picture of racial oppression and exploitation. He stresses that the Yahoos originally carne from another place. They are physically distinct from the Houyhnhnms. So that we can see the attack on colonialism in the final chapter of *Gulliver's Travels* as either a humane indictment of exploitation - or as an evasion to prevent his analysis from being applied to domestic politics, and the class oppressions and resentments there.

Gulliver's complaint about colonialism arises from his fear that the European Yahoos could arrive and destroy the society of the Houyhnhnms. The irony is that the European Yahoos will destroy the Houyhnhnms' society by introducing into it a system of exploitative relationships that the Houyhnhnms themselves already impose on the Yahoos. The Houyhnhnms' treatment of the Yahoos is the only example of a slave-owning or a colonial society in action that we

are given. But if the Europeans arrived, then they would naturally treat the Houyhnhnms as beasts of burden, since they look like horses. What this means is indicated by the way the Houyhnhnms already treat the Yahoos. Although the Yahoos were not the indigenous aboriginals invaded and colonised by the Houyhnhnms, the way they are treated gives substance to the attack on colonialism with which Gulliver concludes his book. That attack is not an unintegrated diatribe, but an explicit handling of a theme that the previous chapters of Book IV have been presenting in action, in character.

> A Crew of Pyrates are driven by a Storm they know not whither; at length a Boy discovers Land from the Top-Mast; they go on Shore to rob and plunder; they see an harmless People, are entertained with Kindness, they give the Country a new Name, they take formal possession of it for the King, they set up a rotten Plank or a Stone for a memorial, they murder two or three Dozen of the Natives, bring away a Couple more by Force for a Sample, return home, and get their Pardon. Here commences a new Dominion acquired with a Title by *Divine Right.* Ships are sent with the first Opportunity; the Natives driven out or destroyed, their Princes tortured to Discover their Gold; a free Licence given to all Acts of Inhumanity and Lust; the Earth reeking with the Blood of its Inhabitants: And this execrable Crew of Butchers employed in so pious an Expedition, is a *modem Colony* sent to convert and civilize an idolatrous and barbarous People.
> (IV.12; 278)

The subjugation of the Yahoos is the subjugation of a people, of a race. It bears a relationship to specific English practice just as Book I relates to the relationships between England and France in the early 18th century in specific detail, and as Lagado relates to specific practices of the Royal Society.

This account of the Houyhnhnms' treatment of the Yahoos suggests then an increase in political sophistication in the analyses presented through *Gulliver's Travels.* From the triviality and absurdity of Lilliputian politics where no ideas can be taken seriously, we move to the presentation of the theory of the mixed monarchy where the conflicting interests are presented as serious but innate, not really 'political', and conclude with the modern analysis of the

Houyhnhnms' society as one founded on social and economic oppression.

The revelation of the political nature of the Houyhnhnm society relates to the political themes of the earlier books in an important way: the revelation is expressed in terms of foreign policy. Swift's denunciation is of English colonialism: the Houyhnhnms and Yahoos are not members of the same race or nation, but quite distinct from each other; their relationship is one of racial or national domination, not class oppression. Similarly the indictment of Lilli put emerges as a result of the king' s wanting to subjugate another nation, Blefuscu, not from the internal conduct of the kingdom. Writing about the domestic policies of Lilliput, Blefuscu, Brobdingnag, Laputa, Swift does not deal with internal class oppression. In so far as he analyses internal policies it is in terms of their absurdities or idiocies. He does not allow that there can be legitimate internal clashes. He accepts the theory of the three estates but deduces from it a harmonious compromise, not continual conflict. Irvin Ehrenpreis has summarised these views in 'Swift on Liberty':

His belief in mixed government, his opposing of the old, wellborn, country families to the *nouveau-riche* moneylenders and tradesmen, his resentment of the rabble, and his loathing of oppression were all typical of the late seventeenth century. Under these he exhibits those neo-classical traits made familiar by A. O. Lovejoy as uniformitarianism, rationalistic anti-intellectualism, and a negative philosophy of history. (146)

Although in Book IV Swift is led to a criticism of economic practices in England, this theme is not developed. It is significant that this is introduced in the book in which he is showing the economic basis of the exploitation of the Yahoos, suggesting again a deepening seriousness of analysis. But the sort of indictment he makes is of the moral nature of the king of Brobdingnag' s attack on English practice. Gulliver declares in Book IV that:

the rich Man enjoyed the Fruit of the poor Man's Labour, and the latter were a Thousand to One in Proportion to the former. That the Bulk of our People were forced to live miserably, by labouring every Day for small wages to make a few live

plentifully. I enlarged myself much on these and many other Particulars to the same Purpose: But his Honour was still to seek: For he went upon a Supposition that all Animals had a Title to their Share in the Productions of the Earth; and especially those who presided over the rest. (IV.6; 235)

The last phrase makes it clear that though there are immoral inequalities in English practice, the essential theory is sound; the communistic 'all Animals had a Title to their Share in the Productions of the Earth' is explicitly defined as not communistic with the 'and especially those who presided over the rest.' Some in England are rewarded with too little. But the structures of authority, natural rulers, feudal ownership, capitalist investment - whatever form of authority - are not challengable. The 'natural rulers' 'especially' must profit.

In his attitudes to internal, to domestic political issues, Swift, as Orwell pointed out, though in many matters 'a rebel and iconoclast', 'cannot be labeled "Left"' (IV.57; 253). But when he deals with the relationships between nations, then he recognizes and denounces oppressions. The explanation no doubt lies in part in his direct experiences of England's treatment of Ireland. There Swift encountered the receiving end of colonial oppression. But in terms of the domestic life of Ireland or England, his social position committed him to the perpetuation of a hierarchical system, and protected him from experiencing oppressions. The plan of the king of Lilliput to subjugate Blefuscu is seen as a serious issue: different nations should exist in equality. With the different orders, the three classes, Swift's commitment to co-existence, to balance, ensures his hostility to the attempts of either monarch, nobility, or people to achieve absolute domination; but it is a co-existence within a hierarchical system. That in no way disturbs him. The economic and hierarchical system by which the Houyhnhnms oppress the Yahoos is exposed to criticism only because Swift can present the relationship of the Houyhnhnms to the Yahoos as one of a different species, a different race, a different nation to each other: he can see it in terms of subjugation, colonial exploitation. But he has nothing to say, it is important to note, about the defined classes within the Houyhnhnm society - the white, sorrel and iron-gray horses born in an inferior social station.

As the reader is led along through stages of developing political

sophistication in the first three books, there is the expectation that Book IV will offer a society freed from politics; but the pessimistic irony is that the Houyhnhnms are politically organised after all. The final statement is that all societies are political and that all political societies are corrupt or exploitive or both. The same message is delivered throughout English political fiction - we find it again in *Nostromo,* in *Nineteen Eighty-four.* Swift's Christian perspective allows that minor moral improvements can be attempted. But man cannot ever escape from the political world. For the political world is the fallen world. Swift's Christian pessimism is akin here to Milton's argument in *The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates* but whereas Swift deduces a conservatism, Milton recommended a revolutionary activism. Men were originally created free, Milton argued, and

> they lived so, till from the root of Adam's transgression, falling among themselves to doe wrong and violence, and foreseeing that such curses must needs tend to the destruction of them all, they agreed by common league to bind each other from mutual injury, and joyntly to defend themselves against any that gave disturbance or opposition to such agreement. Hence came Citties, Townes and Commonwealths. And because no faith in all was found sufficiently binding, they saw it needful to ordaine some authorities ... These for a while governed well, and with much equitie decided all things at thir owne arbitrement: till the temptation of such a power left absolute in their hands, perverted them at length to injustice and partialitie ... (351-2)

Milton's conclusion was, let us get rid of the corrupt and incompetent and try a new set of people and new systems. Since political systems were established because man was fallen, the individual systems had nothing sacred or sacrosanct about them.

Swift takes the conservative line. Political institutions and social organisations were established because man was fallen; and because man was fallen, they themselves were inevitably corrupt as institutions. Political structures are hence unavoidable, inevitable, necessary - and also inadequate and imperfectible. We will never get perfection, let's just leave things as they are for fear we get something worse. The point of view, of course, being Swift's comfortable social situation. A lot of things could be worse for Swift

than the structure that allowed that; and Swift was aware of that, that was what he feared.

George Meredith's *Beauchamp's Career:*
Politics, Realism and Romance

In 1867 George Meredith's friend Commander Frederick Maxse stood as a Radical candidate at a Southampton by-election, and was defeated. Meredith spent two months in Southampton helping Maxse in his campaign, and the grounding in this experience is obvious in the novel, not only in the physical description of the town of 'Bevisham' and its environs, the harbour (Southampton water), the island (Isle of Wight) and the yachting on the Solent, but also in the central figure of Beauchamp. We need not agree with Siegfried Sassoon that 'Beauchamp is Maxse' (157) but the similarities are clear enough - both Maxse and Beauchamp moving from naval careers (and retaining their military titles) into radical politics. G. M. Young has remarked that 'Meredith did not learn his politics from Maxse, but the experiences they shared in the Southampton canvass gave him an insight into the nature of the political animal, whether candidate or elector, which would make *Beauchamp's Career* even if it were nothing else, a document - and a most farsighted document - for the political history of its time' (xiii).

Contemporary reviewers of *Beauchamp's Career* (1875) remarked upon the documentary accuracy of the party-political analysis Meredith presented. H. D. Traill in the *Pall Mall Gazette* pointed to

> the completeness with which the author has succeeded in individualising a series of characters belonging generically to the same type in respect of social position and politics ... The feudal Toryism of Everard Romfrey, the martinet unidea-ed Toryism of Colonel Halkett ... the hard-headed Philistine Toryism of Blackburn Tuckham, and the sceptical eclectic Conservatism of Seymour Austin and Stukely Culbrett, belonging to four separate and clearly marked types ... Nor is there less felicity of discrimination displayed in the Radicalism of Nevil Beauchamp,

of Dr. Shrapnel and of Lydiard. Mr. Grancey Lespel represents thoroughly well the 'landed variety' of the old Whig ... (12)

The documentary basis for the political portraits in the novel is firmly grounded, then, and attested by contemporaries. Similarly the political issues - the Game laws, the press servilely dependent on its advertisers, the Navy estimates - are very specific issues; even Nevil's programme for opening museums on Sundays was the sort of thing radicals found themselves caught up in; it was still an issue in William Morris's 1877 lecture, 'The Decorative Arts'.

Such documentary specificity is basic to the political accuracy of the novel. Although larger issues, ideas rather than particular reforms, are discussed in the novel - capitalism, the existence of a leisure class, the role of the clergy as establishment lackeys - many of the conversations are firmly based on specific, contemporary issues. So we encounter the future of Gibraltar, the war against the Chinese, the Manchester free traders. Margaret Harris has explored this topicality of the novel. Both components are necessarily there, the general issues and the specific details. One of the concerns of *Beauchamp's Career* is the problem of translating political enthusiasm, abstract political conviction, into specific political action. The documentary detail is necessary to show the political objectives of that moment in time; and then we can see how far away those specific objectives are from political ideals and abstractions and enthusiasms. Nevil's initial theoretical political enthusiasm has to be tested by its ability to survive the mundane and trivial documentary detail, and to realise that not all that detail is unimportant.

Morris E. Speare in *The Political Novel* remarked that *'Beauchamp's Career* is rather a satire upon English political Conservatism than it is an encomium upon the political thought of Bright and Cobden'. (241) Taking care not to accept any implicit slight of the novel's radicalism here, it is worth taking Speare's other point. The novel is set almost entirely amongst the families of the aristocracy and upper middle class - frequently amongst naval or military families. It is in this essentially an anatomy of the establishment. The majority of the scenes take place in country houses serviced by armies of servants, with an occasional diversion on horseback or on a yacht. Meredith is not concerned to present a

picture of English society in its entirety, he is not concerned with a social cross-section here; the working-class hardly figures. Gillian Beer has remarked on that omission, though referring to the working class simply as 'the poor' is to share the non-dynamic, depoliticized perceptions of the establishment class Meredith is portraying:

For a novel with a Radical hero *Beauchamp's Career* gives very little place to the poor: a vignette of a poor man's cottage, a group waiting for news at the crisis of Beauchamp's illness, a passing reference to a poacher, the mother of the boy Beauchamp saved. Yet it is a more genuinely radical novel than, for example, *Felix Holt the Radical,* because it is concerned with transforming the sensibility not only of its characters but of its readers. (102)

Had Meredith purported to be writing a social novel of politics and class in England, his omission would have been absurd. But he does not attempt even the incomplete spread of George Eliot in *Felix Holt* or *Middlemarch.* V. S. Pritchett has stressed another aspect of the deliberate limitation of Meredith's focus:

Beauchamp's England is the south; the scene of unrest is the not very politically-minded city of Southampton. The real drama, of course, is in the north and that has to be reported by hearsay. The debate, as in Peacock's attacks on industrialism, child labour and so on, is conversation and hot-tempered epigram about Tories, Whigs and the Manchester manufacturers. (102)

Insofar as the politics of Manchester industry enter *Beauchamp's Career,* they are refracted through the establishment consciousness. Meredith is primarily concerned with presenting an anatomy of establishment conservatism, and with attitude change in a given, closed environment. He is not presenting the conflicting demands of different social classes: rather he is demonstrating the solidarity of the establishment.

But the demonstration comes from a radical perspective. By the presentation of the consciousness of the radical protagonist, and more especially by the more coherently radical figure, Dr. Shrapnel, we are given a context in which to view the establishment

conservatism. Arnold Kettle stresses the central importance of Nevil's radical consciousness to this political novel:

> to compare the effect of Meredith's with George Eliot's novel is immediately to be aware of an essential difference. *Felix Holt* is about Radicalism, but what we tend to remember is not so much its 'subject' as the personal stories of Mrs. Transome and Harold, of Esther and Felix, and the two centres of interest, the personal and the political, never quite unite, except in the very opening chapters. With *Beauchamp's Career* there is no such duality. Whether one says that the novel is about Radicalism or about Beauchamp makes little difference, for the two elements within the conception of the book, the general and the particular, the politico-social and the personal, are inseparable. Nevil Beauchamp is interesting because he is a romantic Radical; romantic Radicalism as a human and historical phenomenon is interesting because the presentation of Nevil Beauchamp's career makes it so. (190)

Nevil's romantic radical consciousness is in constant relationship with both the conservatism of his own establishment class, and with the practical requirements of unromantic radical politics. Gillian Beer is quite wrong when she claims that the plot does not arise from the political:

> *Beauchamp's Career* is a novel of politics. Yet none of the crucial *actions* of the characters derives directly from political principle. The narrative incidents are deliberately and often painfully inadequate as a dramatization of the complex emotional pressures which produce them. (105)

If political principle is narrowly related to party-political programmes, then it is possible to understand Beer's objection. But Meredith's concern, of course, is the distance between party-political programmes and romantic radical impulses: and the distance of both of those from establishment conservatism. The narrative incidents arise from the interplay of Nevil's romanticism with the establishment conservatives, and with the necessities of dull party-political work. That narrative incidents are often

deliberately and painfully inadequate is Meredith's comment on the nature of Nevil's romanticism working in this context.

How radical is Meredith's orientation to his establishment material? Leavis's dismissal of Meredith in *The Great Tradition* might lead us to suspect that hidden beneath the robes of the stylist, which is what the bourgeois critics foreground, is a radical thinker. And in *Romance and Realism* Christopher Caudwell recognized the critic of bourgeois society in Meredith, but saw him as nonetheless trapped in bourgeois notions:

> Not only *The Egoist* but all Meredith's books are about egoists and careerists, and their difficulties in the intricate world of bourgeois rights. This of course accounts for the peculiar coldness and falsity of Meredith's love passages, for egoism chills love and makes it a mere extension of the ego ...
> But both the insincerity of his love scenes and the critical attitude of his witty (rather than comic) spirit were reflections of the advanced decay of bourgeois culture. Like Wells and Shaw at a later date, this careerist tailor's grandchild saw the falsity of the values of the stratum into which he had risen. But he could see no other, and so his only resource is mockery ... (81-2)

The very title *Beauchamp's Career* indicates that same careerism. But the critical spirit here is exploring values other than bourgeois ones. Indeed, setting the novel in the high-bourgeois and aristocratic milieux is one part of its rejection of the bourgeoisie; and looking for solutions in Radicalism is its rejection of all those milieux - aristocratic, bourgeois, feudal, military.

The class solidarity of the establishment is attested importantly. Nevil Beauchamp is standing as second liberal candidate to Mr. Cougham, the senior candidate; but 'Cougham had passed through his Radical phase, as one does on the road to wisdom ... though they were yoked they stood at the opposite ends of the process of evolution' (19;159). Cougham, though standing as a liberal, was 'chrysalis Tory' (19;160). Opposition candidates were, are, so often of the same social class and political views as the establishment sitting candidates: Cougham standing as a liberal is a Tory standing in opposition to another Tory.

But the irony does not rest only on Mr. Cougham the liberal

being in fact a Tory. Nevil Beauchamp himself is central to this irony. The tight-knit structure of the English establishment has often enough been indicated. Dissent comes from the same family as conservatism - just a different wing of the family making sure the family stays in control of the conservative establishment and the radical anti-establishment. Nevil with his firmly establishment background, environment, friends stands as a radical liberal, as a people's champion. To the sceptical eye, he could be just as conservative as his family, engaged in a bit of generational struggle no doubt, so calling himself radical.

This is the situation Meredith explores. Is Nevil just another establishment ploy - an establishment move to control and contain radicalism so it doesn't get out of the hands of the 'natural leaders'? Or is Nevil in fact a genuine radical, rebelling against the values of his class, genuinely committed to massive social change? Not only is Meredith's analysis concentrated onto one class, this class focus is narrowed down further to a concentration onto the family. The familial unit is stressed in the novel when Nevil's cousin Baskelett is nominated to stand as second Tory candidate for Bevisham, against Nevil. The fact of their cousinship is exploited to discredit Nevil's radicalism in the eyes of the radical voters. Whatever political position you vote for, the same establishment, the same family even, will be there. Nor is the 'radical' Nevil's platform that challenging.

> The Address, moreover, was ultra-Radical: museums to be opened on Sundays; ominous references to the Land question, &c.; no smooth passing mention of Reform, such as the Liberal, become stately, adopts in speaking of that property of his, but swinging blows on the heads of many a denounced iniquity. (11;90)

Meredith keeps the address deliberately vague; the only specific point - that museums should open on Sundays - is so trivial amidst the splendid abstractions, that the effect is comic; at the same time its specificness points up the vagueness of the rest of the speech. And as for the threats on property, Nevil is thoroughly dependent on his own unearned income, on his allowance from his uncle. His schemes and tastes are thoroughly aristocratic; for his later scheme, to run a radical newspaper, he would need a fortune. He is a radical

who believes in an aristocracy:

One may venerate old families when they show the blood of the founder, and are not dead wood. I do. And I believe the blood of the founder, though the man may have been a savage and a robber, had in his day finer elements in it than were common. But let me say at a meeting that I respect true aristocracy, I hear a growl and a hiss beginning: why? Don't judge them hastily: because the people have seen the aristocracy opposed to the cause that was weak, and only submitting to it when it commanded them to resist at their peril; clinging to traditions, and not anywhere standing for humanity: much more a herd than the people themselves. Ah! well, we won't talk of it now. I say that is no aristocracy, if it does not head the people in virtue - military, political, national: I mean the qualities required by the times for leadership. (28;269)

He is annoyed at his uncle's marrying Rosamund Culling;

He had no wish to meet his uncle, whose behaviour in contracting a misalliance and casting a shadow on the family, in a manner so perfectly objectless and senseless, appeared to him to call for the reverse of compliments. (44;434)

He inveighs against the 'flood of luxury' of the aristocracy, while the poor go hungry, and after inveighing

He called for claret and water, sighing as he munched bread in vast portions, evidently conceiving that to eat unbuttered bread was to abstain from luxury. He praised passingly the quality of the bread. It came from Steynham, and so did the milk and cream, the butter, chicken and eggs. He was good enough not to object to the expenditure upon the transmission of the accustomed dainties. (42;411)

Such, then, is the radical Nevil Beauchamp. Rosamund remarks on his similarity to his uncle, Everard Romfrey (35;342.53;517). Everard's reply is 'Two ends of a stick are pretty much alike: they're all that length apart'. Their similarities are stressed when

each ends up offering the other an ultimatum for an apology. The central episode of the novel is Everard Romfrey' s thrashing Dr. Shrapnel. In Everard's scheme it is a moral and chivalrous act: he is defying those members of society who give Rosamund Culling a bad name for living with him unmarried. The chapter in which Everard sets out is entitled 'Showing a Chivalrous Gentleman set in Motion' (31; 302). But it is a barbarous act - and the barbarity is sanctioned by the establishment. There is never any suggestion that there might be a court case or that Dr. Shrapnel might be recompensed. Nevil helps nurse him back to health, certainly. But Nevil's main objection to the whipping is not the suffering of Dr. Shrapnel, but the fact that such an act reflects on the family honour. The 'honour' of the family is still a basic priority for this radical - and it is to redeem the family's name that Nevil demands an apology from Everard. It was to avenge Rosamund's name and honour that Everard performed the whipping in the first place. And after all, it was for a similar defence of Rosamund's good name that Nevil as a child had thrashed Cecil Baskelett. Uncle and nephew are very similar.

The episode is paradigmatic of Everard's and Nevil's attitudes. Everard never has any doubt that this is the way to act - he naturally takes the law into his own hands in this pre-social, aristocratic warrior, individualist way. Everard is presented as 'in person a noticeable gentleman, in mind a medieval baron, in politics a crotchety unintelligible Whig . . . At one time he was a hot Parliamentarian, calling himself a Whig, called by the Whigs a Radical, called by the Radicals a Tory, and very happy in fighting them all round' (2;14-15). 'A medieval gentleman with the docile notions of the twelfth century, complacently driving them to grass and wattling them in the nineteenth ... ' (3;27). The hot-headedness, the impetuosity, the. anarchic individualistic aspect of Nevil's radicalism, proclaim the similarity of the uncle to Nevil.

If Nevil is like his uncle, and his uncle is a member of the establishment - even if a crotchety member- what are the values of that establishment class that might come into conflict with Nevil's radicalism - or that might throw light on the extent of that radicalism? The property bonds within the establishment are demonstrated fully by Meredith - bonds that keep the establishment close knit. In so far as there is any 'plot' it revolves round the

possible marriage between Nevil and Cecilia Halkett - a marriage both Colonel Halkett and Everard Romfrey are at first concerned to settle, for the cementing of class and property bonds. It is not a romance extraneous to the political theme as, say, that between Felix and Esther that George Eliot offers us in *Felix Holt.* Meredith has tied it into his social analysis. In the end Cecilia marries Blackburn Tuckham, the Tory candidate. Politics-property-marriage are all necessarily involved here. The loyalties members of the class show to each other, and the ideas they are in agreement over are demonstrated in Colonel Halkett's defence of Romfrey's whipping of Dr. Shrapnel even though he has no knowledge of what it was in response to, let alone whether it was a justified response (which even in Romfrey's barbarous system it turns out not to be).

Though he could not guess the reason for Mr. Romfrey' s visit to Bevisham, he was, he said, quite prepared to maintain that Mr. Romfrey had a perfect justification for his conduct. Cecilia hinted at barbarism. The colonel hinted at high police duties that gentlemen were sometimes called on to perform for the protection of society ... Evidently he had resolved to back Mr. Romfrey blindly. That epistle of Dr. Shrapnel's merited condign punishment and had met with it, he seemed to rejoice in saying: and this was his abstract of the same: 'An old charlatan who tells his dupe to pray every night of his life for the beheading of kings and princes, and scattering of the clergy, and disbanding the army, that he and his rabble may fall upon the wealthy, and show us numbers win; and he'll undertake to make them moral!' (32;317)

Because of his political views, the establishment class believe that Shrapnel deserved to be whipped anyway, whatever else he might have done. Romfrey was only doing his social duty in acting for all of them, expressing their wish.

'And he deserved it!' the colonel pursued, on emerging from the cabin at Lord Lockrace's heels. 'I've no doubt he richly deserved it. The writer of that letter we heard Captain Baskelett read the other day deserves the very worst he gets.'
'Baskelett bored the Club the other night with a letter of a

Radical fellow,' said Lord Lockrace. 'Men who write that stuff should be strung up and whipped by the common hangman.'

.....

Colonel Halkett protested that he never could quite make out what Radicals were driving at.
'The rents,' Lord Lockrace observed in the conclusive tone of brevity. (32;315)

Lord Lockrace is, of course, quite right. For Lockrace and the rest of Meredith's characters here pretty well, the rents are their god-given due. It is by their land, their property, their unearned income that this conservative class can live the way it does - can live at all. And Meredith absorbs into this attack on landowners and capital Arnold's attack on the barbarism of the aristocracy and philistinism of the middle classes - an attack on the English establishment mindlessness, its contempt for the arts. The two qualities are not necessarily associated - and Meredith does not assert that they are; indeed, he shows with the French count, Renee's father, an equally inequitable political and social system supporting a man of taste; the count looks at the art treasures of Venice on his feudal, unearned wealth; while Romfrey wouldn't go to visit Nevil in Venice - it would mean 'breaking loose from shooting engagements at a minute's notice, to rush off to a fetid foreign city notorious for mud and mosquitoes' (5;42).

A love for art does not justify or even soften the count's feudalism. However a specific contempt for art is usually a sign with Meredith of something wrong with a character.

Captain Baskelett respected the poetic art for its magical power over woman's virtue, but he disliked hearing verses ... He abused his friend roundly, telling him it was contemptible to be quoting verses. (30;301).

The Tory Blackburn Tuckham remarks

'We've got ten thousand too many fellows writing already ... it's all unproductive dead weight on the country, these fellows with their writings!' (28;266)

Indeed, that is true; if the country is to be the sort of country the Tuckhams and Baskelett's want, writing is a dead weight on the country. It is Tuckham who gives the most coherent defence of capitalism and property:

'Property is ballast as well as treasure. I call property funded good sense. I would give it every privilege. If we are to speak of patriotism, I say the possession of property guarantees it. I maintain that the lead of men or property is in most cases sure to be the safe one . . . '
Mr. Tuckham grew fervent in his allusions to our wealth and our commerce. Having won the race and gained the prize, shall we let it slip out of our grasp? Upon this topic his voice descended to tones of priest-like awe; for are we not the envy of the world? Our wealth is countless, fabulous. It may well inspire veneration. And we have won it with our hands, thanks (he implied it so) to our religion ... We perish as a Great Power if we cease to look sharp ahead, hold firm together, and make the utmost of what we possess. The word for the performance of those duties is Toryism: a word with an older flavour than Conservatism, and Mr. Tuckham preferred it. By all means let working men be free men: but a man must earn his freedom daily, or he will become a slave in some form or another: and the way to earn it is by work and obedience to right direction. In a country like ours, open on all sides to the competition of intelligence and strength, with a Press that is the voice of all parties and of every interest; in a country offering to your investments three and a half and more per cent., secure as the firmament! -
He perceived an amazed expression on Miss Halkett's countenance; and 'Ay,' said he, 'that means the certainty of food to millions of mouths, and comforts, if not luxuries, to half the population. A safe percentage on savings is the basis of civilization.' (26;247-8)

And he goes on to drink his claret - luxuries are allowed for him - and 'commended the fishing here, the shooting there'; he's exempt from the necessities of daily work and earning his freedom anew each day. Beauchamp elsewhere deals with the question of the press,

which Meredith shows us quite clearly did not give voice to all parties and to every interest.

Tuckham' s conservatism is one that believes in the necessity of capitalist industry. Romfrey, however, is opposed to that; he hates the free traders of Manchester as 'negrophiles and sweaters of Christians.' The collocation is interesting - and worthy of *Huckleberry Finn* for its encapsulation of an ideology. Romfrey's dislike of the 'sweaters of Christians' is not the result of any belief in the equality of man, the brotherhood of humanity: he condemns Manchester as negrophile - and he has no sympathy with Nevil's serving in the navy to catch slavetraders. Romfrey' s objection is that industry is something ignoble, noisy and vulgar, unEnglish; that Romfrey and his like are more and more dependent for their leisured existence on the profits of industry, he does not recognize. Romfrey's ethos is brilliantly caught by Meredith in a passage shortly after the horsewhipping of Shrapnel:

Moreover, the month of September was drawing nigh; he had plenty to think of. The entire land (signifying all but all of those who occupy the situation of thinkers in it) may be said to have been exhaling the same thought in connexion with September. Our England holds possession of a considerable portion of the globe, and it keeps the world in awe to see her bestowing so considerable a portion of her intelligence upon her recreations. To prosecute them with her whole heart is an ingenious exhibition of her power. Mr. Romfrey was of those who said to his countrymen, 'Go yachting; go cricketing; go boat-racing; go shooting; go horse-racing, nine months of the year, while the other Europeans go marching and drilling.' Those occupations he considered good for us; and our much talking, writing, and thinking about them characteristic, and therefore good. And he was not one of those who do penance for that sweating indolence in the fits of desperate panic. Beauchamp's argument that the rich idler begets the idling vagabond, the rich wagerer, the brutal swindler, the general thirst for a mad round of recreation a generally-increasing disposition to avoid serious work, and the unbraced moral tone of the country an indifference to national responsibility (an argument doubtless extracted from Shrapnel, talk tall as the very demagogue when he stood

upright), Mr. Romfrey laughed at scornfully, affirming that our manufactures could take care of themselves. As for invasion, we are circled by the sea. Providence has done that for us, and may be relied upon to do more in an emergency.- The children of wealth and the children of the sun alike believe that Providence is for them, and it would seem that the former can do without it less than the latter, though the former are less inclined to give it personification. (33; 320-1)

There is no need to demonstrate further Meredith's analysis of the beliefs and attitudes of the upper and upper-middle class establishment; his exposure of philistine conservatism, of feudal barbarity informs the whole novel, and once noticed (and so many critics have not remarked on it) its central importance is obvious. And the radical protagonist Nevil Beauchamp belongs to this establishment world being analysed. His attachment to it and his sharing unconsciously much of its ideology is basic to his character and to Meredith's theme. But Meredith's theme is also one of political change, political conversion. The radicalism that is part of the novel is a dynamic radicalism - it isn't safely contained like Felix Holt's radicalism, but it works evaluatively within the novel. The more radical Nevil becomes, the more radical the book becomes, the more all of it can be re-read from this critical radical position. And Meredith involves this with a theme of conversion - the form of the novel enacting the conversion of its protagonist. So we see Nevil belonging firmly to the conservative establishment that is analyzed, and then we see his attempts to break away from it, his attempts to preach radicalism in it, and his gradual understanding of what radicalism in fact is - the continuing radicalization of Nevil that only his sudden death curtails. In this sense the death is tragic; it wasn't a convenient death, arriving when he has no more to say.

The enthusiasm that drives Nevil into political action is initially a romantic, chivalric enthusiasm - something associable with the feudal, with his uncle. He fights for Rosamund's good name as a child; he performs valiantly in the Crimean war; his valour is of the single-handed individual hero variety. Romfrey wrote to him:

They tell me that while you were facing the enemy, temporarily

attaching yourself to one of the regiments - I forget which, though I have heard it named - you sprang out under fire on an eagle clawing a hare. I like that.

and again

I have a letter from your captain, informing me that I am unlikely to see you home unless you learn to hold yourself in. (4;36-7)

Individual valour and a sentimental sympathy for the victim inspired his single-handed acts of rash courage. And a certain lack of conventional proportion. This sympathy for the underdog was of course there before Nevil left for the war, when he stopped the keepers chasing a poacher and went in chase himself. 'I caught him myself, but recognized him as one of a family I take an interest in, and let him run before they came up.' (3;29) It is an incident that causes one of Nevil's early clashes with Romfrey - and shares, of course, all Romfrey' s arbitrary impetuosity.

Nevil at the beginning of the novel promises to be a hero of a romantic episode with Renee, only daughter of the Comte de Croisnel. Nevil has saved the life of her brother Roland - so 'he who had saved her brother must be nearly brother himself, yet was not quite, yet must be loved, yet not approached' (5;43). But the Renee episode is an important development and qualification of story-book romance. The total romantic situation - beautiful woman, man who's saved her brother's life - doesn't issue in romance. Nevil's very romantic chivalrous illusions complicate the simplicity of the plot line, and leave us unclear as to what his motives might be. In his chivalric and sentimental way he believes he is doing a good thing in saving Renee from what as an Englishman he abhors - an arranged marriage to a man old enough to be her father. But how far that is a rationalisation of simple sexual desire, is never clear. Meredith brilliantly presents it as ambiguous.

Renee's appeal to Nevil is two-fold: she is as a woman a second class citizen, a victim of feudal attitudes to marriage, and so she needs - he has no doubt - his support and sympathy; but secondly, she is also an aristocrat, with all the appeal of a mysterious and

aristocratic culture. Renee's aristocratic birth is essential. This is the sort of person Nevil is, Meredith is stressing, so that the extent of his radicalization can be realised - that is the battle radicalism has in England.

Class, 'good family' and such like are important to this 'radical'. And indeed he *seems* like he should be the ideal, stereotypical 'romantic' lover - dumb, ex-military chap. He certainly chooses to associate with the people who would expect him to be like that - that is the social milieu he remains in. Nevil's continued devotion both to Renee and to upper-middle class Cecilia, attachments persisting long into his developing radicalism, indicates the extent of his class attitudes; in personal terms he is attached to these aristocratic and upper-middle class ladies even when politically he is in opposition to the values of their class. This has of course become such an accepted fact of leftist politicians in the years since Meredith wrote that we probably don't even realize that Meredith is being *ironic* about the idea, he thinks it's grotesque, and has built the grotesqueries into the centre of his conception of the novel. Meredith no doubt observed from 1870s realities; he could hardly have imagined that only a hundred years later, his satirical observation would have achieved the status of a truism.

It is only right at the end of his career that Nevil breaks away from both Renee and Cecilia and marries Jenny Denham, niece of the radical Dr. Shrapnel; but even she is no daughter of the people. Nonetheless, her background and attitudes are vastly different from Renee and Cecilia's.

We have then initially a dashing Romantic hero - brilliant reputation from the Crimean war, distinguished family, and, to make him sympathetic, he has a generous kind spirit for the underdog. And the structure of the novel promises to be romantic, centres on such romantic aspects of a young man's career; following, that is, the one hero in a romantic way, not proposing to offer a picture of a cross section of society with balanced interest spread through three or four main characters. And we have the romantic settings - Venice, the wooing by Nevil of Renee, the plan to elope by sea.

But *Beauchamp's Career* develops very differently. The hero's expectations and the novel's structural promise are foiled jointly. For it is a novel about politics, modern politics, radicalism. And

Meredith goes on to demonstrate that the romantic individualistic commitment of Nevil's is not appropriate for political action: the novel is concerned to deal with the gulf between on the one hand enthusiasm, commitment, ideas, and on the other hand the political practicalities. Individualistic romantic enthusiasm needs to be channeled into socialized practicality. The romantic is frustrated and ends continually in the bathetic. Nevil does not elope with Renee; nothing splendid happens. The incident parallels that episode of his singlehanded youthful challenge to the French guard in defence of England's honour - when nothing happened. Nevil's feudal chivalry (inherited from his uncle's medieval baronial attitudes) are inappropriate for the nineteenth-century. Every time Nevil succumbs to these emotions, disaster results. In the middle of his electoral campaign, he receives the summons from Renee - and romantically dashes over in response to her cryptic note. But she is not waiting to be rescued from dire distress; she simply had a wager with an effete French aristocrat that Nevil would respond to her summons. It is unlikely that Nevil would have won the election anyway but his absurd departure, and the consequent scandal from which his opponents make political capital, demonstrate the gulf between his romantic enthusiasms, and the realities of parliamentary, political action.

His commitment to radical politics - developing on from his vaguer humanitarian single-handed hero exploits, and his serving on an anti-slave trade frigate - occurred within two hours of landing in England. His impetuosity is emphasized. But his impetuosity is not to be ridiculed; it is the force of his commitment, it is that that drives him into politics, - unlike, say, the fence-sitting aphoristic, epigrammatic, negative wit and wisdom of Stukely Culbrett. But it is an impetuosity and energy that must be channeled if it can be of any use, if it is not to be lost in the indulgent and counter-effective.

The inappropriateness of Nevil's romanticism, and the frustration of his romantic hopes, go along with a similar frustration of romantic episodes in the novel. The elopement with Renee at Venice comes to nothing, the summons from Renee during the election is all for nothing; and when later she comes to England, instead of their love at last being dramatically and romantically and passionately fulfilled, in some beautiful yet absurd operatic way, Nevil calls for Rosamund to stay in the house to stop any breath of

scandal and rejects Renee. It is not even a grandiose, heart-rending, romantic rejection - but a prosaic, practical one. And of course it isn't even *practical,* it fails in its object anyway, scandal isn't prevented - and how could summoning Rosamund, for so long a figure of scandal living in sin (Nevil has fought for her 'name', Everard horsewhips Shrapnel over it), ever be imagined to produce the desired effect? There is an element of self-destructiveness, of blind compulsive accident-proneness in Nevil, as if psychically he summons the very thing he feared - and maybe wanted all along; maybe he does essentially want to get rid of Renee to free himself for his radical commitments. And doesn't his radicalism stand for a total objection to the life style and values of the establishment, doesn't it stand for a world in which he could have an affair with Renee if he wanted; and he could chose not to have one and not compromise her if he wanted; and in that sort of ideal society there wouldn't be any 'compromising'?

All these possibilities are raised by the deliberate frustration of plot suspense - the continual explosion of or bathetic curtailment of some potentially romantic cliché activity. Meredith early on in the novel remarks on what he is doing, to let us know that what he is doing is intentional, that it isn't ineptitude in handling romance, but a deliberate frustration of romance:

> I am reminded by Mr. Romfrey' s profound disappointment in the youth, that it will be repeatedly shared by many others: and I am bound to forewarn readers of this history that there is no plot in it. The hero is chargeable with the official disqualification of constantly-offending prejudices, never seeking to please; and all the while it is upon him the narrative hangs. (4;33)

And Meredith goes on to tell how Nevil 'with every inducement to offer himself for a romantic figure . . . despises the pomades and curling-irons of modem romance' (4;34). Brought up, as we have seen, in an environment conducive to his becoming a romantic hero, and conducting his early career with an appropriate romantic individualist impetuosity, he destroys the romantic image continually - by allying himself with radicalism especially; and he goes on, after his romantic commitment to radicalism, to shun that romanticism that is politically unhelpful. He renounces Renee most

unromantically: because she will not live in England, and he must remain there for his political aims. And because Dr. Shrapnel is always advising him to avoid sexual scandal.

Translating political enthusiasm into action requires not the military, single-handed derring-do, the old knightly bravery, that Nevil has in common with his uncle Everard, but the constant platforming, speech-making, canvassing, being pelted with fruit. The romantic settings of Venice are replaced by English provincial church halls. It is all ignominious, vulgar, and slow after Nevil's military fame. But he accepts it readily. Nevil's initial program has little practical about it, and anyway it is disrupted by the romantic flight to Renee. There is initially a tragic, and absurd, gulf between political conviction, enthusiasm and idealism - and political action. But it is a gulf that has to be bridged. Significantly, Meredith moves from disrupted romantic action to the canvassing episode. The dreary routine, the personal humiliations, the endless arguments of canvassing are the bridge for converting Nevil's enthusiasm into action; this is the way to win votes, and if he can win sufficient votes he can get elected, and if he can get elected . . . It is all very remote and laborious after rescuing a hare from an eagle in mid battle. The canvassing episode is the new battlefield for the election campaign. Nevil, of course, loses the fight.

It is one of the significant exceptions to the overall upper-crusty settings of the novel. The scenes in the yachts, drawing-rooms and chateaux have demonstrated all too clearly the barbarian political prejudice, the hostility to ideas, the reactionary nature of 1870s English - and European - establishment life. To translate political enthusiasm into political action in a parliamentary way, this blind prejudice has to be converted; because this blindly prejudiced establishment controls the political machine, the suffrage, the parties. The political problem is seen by Meredith as a problem of changing human attitudes, as a drama of consciousness.

And Nevil's solution is to bring the war back home; not only to fight on his lecture tours with Dr. Shrapnel, but to fight in the drawing-rooms of his family and class; these provide the wider, enduring battleground for Nevil. And Meredith presents it as a valid area of activity. For until the individual is changed, there can be no political change. Political change here is seen as the sum of individual changes. If he cannot succeed in the public meeting,

maybe Nevil can succeed in private conversation. And to change one consciousness in the establishment ...

With this in mind we can see the significance of Romfrey' s remark towards the end of the novel. Rosamund says

'what I feel is that he - our Nevil! - has accomplished hardly anything, if anything!'
'He hasn't marched on London with a couple of hundred thousand men: no, he hasn't done that,' the earl said, glancing back in his mind through Beauchamp's career. 'And he escapes what Stukely calls his nation's scourge, in the shape of a statue turned out by an English chisel. No: we haven't had much public excitement out of him. But one thing he did do: *he got me down on my knees!'*
Lord Romfrey pronounced these words with a sober emphasis that struck the humour of it sharply into Rosamund's heart, through some contrast it presented between Nevil's aim at the world and hit of a man: the immense deal thought of it by the earl, and the very little that Nevil would think of it - the great domestic achievement to be boasted of by an enthusiastic devotee of politics! (55; 534)

For the political Romantic, which Nevil never wholly ceases to be, as Rosamund realizes in recognizing how he wouldn't attach Lord Romfrey's significance to this event, getting Romfrey on his knees to apologize to the outsider radical Shrapnel, is merely bathetic as the high point of a career that aimed at political significance. The comedy is there. But Romfrey's emphasis is from another perspective the correct one. The great domestic achievement, Rosamund called it. But it is just because it is a domestic achievement that it is politically significant. We saw earlier the familial interrelationships of the conservative establishment. To begin to achieve political change the conservative establishment must be made, taught, wooed, converted, to think differently; and this means the conversion must occur largely within the family and by the family. Dr. Shrapnel would never be admitted into the house to begin propagandizing directly to any of these establishment conservatives. By getting Romfrey to apologise to Dr. Shrapnel, Nevil has achieved a major change of consciousness

in his uncle: it was an activity unthinkable at the novel's opening: and at the novel's end, we see Dr. Shrapnel and Lord Romfrey side by side, united in their grief at Nevil's death, but also united in a developing understanding. To find them together, to find their concerns and fates touching, is a mark of the change Nevil has achieved. To have them standing here together, on this same spot, is a fine visual image of the achieved relationship between the two men: I won't say unity, because it clearly isn't that. But at the beginning of the novel they could never have been seen in the same frame as this dual image. Contrast it, for instance with that often cited ending of E. M. Forster's *A Passage to India* (1924), where Aziz and Fielding are separated by their horses swerving apart. Or the epigraph to *Howards End* (1910), 'only connect'. Meredith achieved, equally visually, the reverse of Forster's political image, and expressed the fulfillment of that epigram. Nevil, after all, has achieved something. He has made a connection. He has led no revolution, he has not even got into the corruptly elected parliament when the novel ends. But he has achieved individual successes: small, unromantic, bathetic, mundane successes - but the necessary basis for social change. Romfrey is one; in more practical, political terms, there is the success in getting Carpendike to vote for him. Walter Wright has commented on how 'the converting of one man by argument and character was in the direction of progress for Meredith' (125). But perhaps his most significant, and the most realized in fictional terms, example of change is that of Cecilia. Nevil's own conversion to radicalism, and his conversion to subduing his personality to the rigours of disciplined campaigning, we do not see. The first meeting with Dr. Shrapnel, and the campaigning tours, occur offstage. Meredith is uninterested in these - he senses that for him at any rate they would be dull, tedious, even distasteful perhaps. Meredith has a theme he finds more interesting, more complex and subtle and offering of manoeuvre for sardonic ironies as well as a mark of the battles radicalism will have to encounter. So he focuses on Nevil's arguments with Cecilia, his attempts to convert her, bully her, woo her politically; and then he goes on to show Cecilia using Nevil's arguments in resisting the barbarism and political benightedness of her family; it is in Cecilia that we see the fullest drama of the consciousness, in her we see the process of resistance, considering,

wavering, conversion and change. With Everard Romfrey the change is a personal one; but it is a necessary beginning; without such personal conversion there is unlikely to be a political change of heart. With Cecilia we see the further change of her political opinions, the modification of her ideology. With Renee, the love of his aristocratic, pre-radical days, Nevil does not really argue: on the ship to Venice, he bullies her into a submission to him, but mainly assumes responsibility for her thoughts, answering for her. When Nevil refuses to return to Venice, and Renee's brother tells him, 'You heard her wish to return to Venice, I say,' Nevil replies simply, 'She has no wish that is not mine' (10;76), justifying this arrogance on his usual liberal sentimental grounds - that her brother always speaks for her so she never expresses her true feelings: 'she can neither speak nor think for herself: you lead her blindfolded.' If she is not allowed to express her thoughts, Nevil will express them for her and coincidentally they are exactly the thoughts he would have expressed himself anyway. With Meredith, man's relationship and attitude towards woman is a pretty clear index of his further politico-social attitudes. He had identified the concept male chauvinism some ninety years before the concept or phrase became widely current, and he had related it to other forms of political and social oppressions.

But Nevil develops. When Nevil rushes off to Tourdestelle at Renee's summons in the middle of his election campaign, Meredith remarks, 'He thought little of politics in relation to Renee' (23;209). But politics are present in Nevil's first meeting with Cecilia on his return to England. Delighted to see him, she is somewhat shattered when it turns out he has called in order to get her father to vote for him. And not only is his being merely political in his visit shattering, the fact that he has chosen radicalism is some sort of lunatic betrayal. 'Have you gone over to the enemy, Nevil?' she asks, and elaborates:

‘We are Tories, you know, Nevil. Papa is a thorough Tory. He cannot vote for you. Indeed I have heard him say he is anxious to defeat the plots of an old Republican in Bevisham - some doctor there; and I believe he went to London to look out for a second Tory candidate to oppose to the Liberals. Our present Member is quite safe, of course. Nevil, this makes me unhappy. Do you not

feel that it is playing traitor to one's class to join those men?'
(15;131)

Her attitudes are totally those of her class, and direct paraphrases of her father's views (male domination of woman identified with this reactionary politics that are imposed onto the women - the political nature of male chauvinism emerges again and again).

'Yet the wealthier we are the more an army is wanted, both to defend our wealth and to preserve order. I fancy he half inclines to compulsory enlistment. Do speak to him on that subject.'
... (Nevil) nodded and spoke coolly, 'An army *to preserve order?* So, then, an army to threaten civil war!'
'To crush revolutionists.'
'Agitators, you mean ... ' (17;144)

The grotesquerie is not caricature, as Meredith knew. Troops had been used to put down radicals before, at Peterloo, and were to be used again. As Nevil, one time naval officer himself, remarks, drawing on discussions with Dr. Shrapnel,

as the middle-class are the party in power, they would not, if they knew the use of arms, move an inch farther in Reform, for they would no longer be in fear of the class below them.
(17;144)

The 'if' is somewhat gracious - or a mark of Meredith's own mystification - the desperate refusal to recognize that the middleclass indeed did, do, know the use of arms. Cecilia expresses her class views in conversation, in argument with Nevil. There is a dialectic, there is change. She is surprised afterwards to find herself taking on certain of Nevil's emotional attitudes and positions. Angered at the ballad about Nevil and the 'French Marquees', she expresses her disgust at politics involving such 'disgraceful squibs'. Her father replies,

'there's pitch and tar in politics as well as on shipboard.'
'I do not see that there should be,' said Cecilia resolutely.
'We can't hope to have what should be.'

'Why not? I would have it: I would do my utmost to have it,'
she flamed out. (17;149-50)

She looks forward to Ursula in *The Rainbow* in her impassioned refusal to accept things as they are, just because they are as they are. Her father notices the Beauchamp-like emphases flaming out:

'Your *utmost?'* Her father was glancing at her foregone
mimicry of Beauchamp's occasional strokes of emphasis. 'Do
your utmost to have your bonnet on in time for us to walk to
church. I can't bear driving there.'
Cecilia went to her room with the curious reflection,
awakened by what her father had chanced to suggest to her mind,
that she likewise could be fervid, positive, uncompromising -
who knows? Radicalish, perhaps, when she looked eye to eye on
an evil. For a moment or so she espied within herself a gulf of
possibilities, wherein black nightbirds, known as queries, roused
by shot of light, do flap their wings. - Her utmost to have be
what should be. And why not? (17;150)

It is a slow, a gradual change. But it is Cecilia's conversion from mindless Toryism, into thinking about politics. She asks Austin to 'Recommend me some hard books to study through the Winter' (28; 263) and her father is appalled to find she has been reading 'three privately-printed full reports of Commander Beauchamp's speeches' (28;271). When Dr. Shrapnel is horsewhipped by Romfrey, she is horrified at the self-satisfied Tory-authoritarian-barbarism of the action. Late in the novel Rosamund tells Nevil that:

Colonel Halkett and Cecilia called on us at Steynham. She
was looking beautiful; a trifle melancholy. The talk was of
your - that - I do not like it, but you hold those opinions - the
Republicanism. She had read your published letters. She spoke
to me of your sincerity. Colonel Halkett of course was vexed.
It is the same with all your friends. She, however, by her tone,
led me to think that she sees you as you are, more than in what
you do. (44;433)

This attestation of Cecilia's belief in Nevil's sincerity (whereas her

father and his set think Nevil's a criminal lunatic), is given especial force by its context of Rosamund's nervousness and abhorrence of even mentioning the word 'Radicalism'. To have persuaded Cecilia of his sincerity and integrity when there was every pressure to make her hold the beliefs of her father and Rosamund, is one of Nevil's political achievements.

Though she lapses back. Converting the establishment to radicalism is a slow, maybe even a hopeless task; maybe Nevil is misguided and only mass revolution will change things. Maybe it isn't worth trying to convert the establishment. Maybe they can never be permanently, sincerely, genuinely changed. Horrified that Nevil is possibly still in love with Renee, and wanting to marry Cecilia merely for her fortune which he will need in order to finance his radical newspaper, Cecilia withdraws from him, and finally marries the Tory Tuckham. All we have is the hope that she will not simply relapse back into mindless Toryism; maybe - surely - Nevil's example, arguments, persuasion will have made some small enduring impression. But we are left with the question, a possibility -not any certainty.

Such small, personal and insecure, shaky conversions are Nevil's achievement. But slight and temporary as they may be, he has at least done *something.* When he is lying sick at Dr. Shrapnel's, weak but recovered, Jenny Denham tells her uncle, Dr. Shrapnel, not to bring home deputations of working men to see Nevil. And Nevil at first agrees. Shrapnel explodes.

'Wrong!' the doctor cried! 'wrong! wrong! Six men won't hurt you more than one. And why check them when their feelings are up? They burn to be speaking some words to you. Trust me, Beauchamp, if we shun to encounter the good warm soul of numbers, our hearts are narrowed to them. The business of our modern world is to open heart and stretch out arms to numbers. In numbers we have our sinews; they are our iron and gold. Scatter them not; teach them the secret of cohesion. Practically, since they gave you not their entire confidence once, you should not rebuff them to suspicions of you as aristocrat, when they rise on the effort to believe a man of, as 'tis called, birth their undivided friend. Meet them!'
'Send them,' said Beauchamp. (54;524)

He has, then, inspired some people, cooperated in the development of a movement, won some people's confidence. And now he must move from the easy one-to-one confrontation, and face a mass organization; leave the drawing rooms of the establishment altogether, and get out into wider organizing activity. It is all so different from his earlier romantic notions; but he has been changing throughout. His initial evasiveness about the game-laws sharing something of his uncle's landowning, hunting, shooting and fishing attitudes - has changed and we find him, when Shrapnel is ill, conducting Shrapnel's correspondence on behalf of poachers. And it is the unglamorous handling of correspondence we see him involved in - contrasting with his earlier impetuous derring-do catching, and releasing of his own accord, that single poacher.

This developing co-operative, disciplined activity is disrupted by Nevil's final gesture, a resurgence of the old, single-handed romanticism as he drowns while attempting to save two small boys. Romfrey and Shrapnel watch the attempts to find his body in the novel's last scene. Romfrey approaches Shrapnel:

He put his arm within the arm of the heavily-breathing man whom he had once flung to the ground, to support him.
'My lord! my lord!' sobbed the woman, and dropped on her knees.
'What's this?' the earl said, drawing his hand away from the woman's clutch at it.

And it's the boy Nevil saved, lost his life for.

Dr. Shrapnel's eyes and Lord Romfrey's fell on the abashed little creature. The boy struck out both arms to get his fists against his eyelids.
This is what we have in exchange for Beauchamp!
It was not uttered, but it was visible in the blank stare at one another of the two men who loved Beauchamp, after they had examined the insignificant bit of mudbank life remaining in this world in the place of him. (56;547)

It is a deeply disturbing ending, and one that has aroused extraordinary critical hostility. Siegfried Sassoon, for instance, remarks 'it makes

one feel as if Meredith had lost patience with the tale and thrown it aside with a savage gesture' (157). The comment is absurd, but it indicates the savage gesture of rejection of the ending many readers feel compelled to make, especially those who retain attachment to the earlier romantic individualist hero image of Nevil. And the rejection is enacted in Romfrey' s rejection of the working-class woman and the saved 'insignificant bit of mudbank life'. All the class tensions of the novel, all the uneasy, unresolved conflicts of elitism and co-operation implicit in Nevil's radicalism, are resurrected at this moment of the death of the hero. Romfrey' s 'What's this?' rather than 'Who's this?' nicely catches the way his class sees the working-class as not people but impersonal things. Nevil had certainly moved beyond that point; and Nevil's attempt at saving the two working-class children is psychologically true of his unsubdued, romantic chivalrous impetuses, and also of his developing sense of solidarity with the working-class. But it is an attempt that shows the limits of such individual attempts; for the cause of radicalism is certainly not advanced by his death. And yet what would have been the worth of Nevil's ideals had he not attempted to save the children, had he rowed past saying, my political career is more important, my political success will save the mass, so this drowning pair must be abandoned? Jack Lindsay remarks correctly that Beauchamp 'cannot advance to mass struggle. He dies in an individual act of heroism, which expresses his anguished desire for union with the common people but which also kills him, returning him to romantic loss' (220). And Lindsay's complaint that Beauchampism 'still can conceive only of individual action, individual heroism and self sacrifice', and fails to grasp 'the secret of cohesion' is true; but in this concrete instance, Beauchamp has no alternative; this was a case where individual heroism was the only choice.

We are forced back to reappraise our concealed assumptions, our suppressed elitism: was this 'insignificant bit of mudbank life' worth Nevil's life? Romfrey withdraws his hand from the woman's grasp spontaneously, instinctively, expressing an unambiguous rejection of the worth of the sacrifice. Jack Lindsay writes, 'There can be no irony in the end of such a man; the saved child is the future for which he has striven; the child is the working-class with whom the next word lies' (220). The novel consider both these conclusions, ends

with nagging questions rather than certainties. We have seen Nevil progressively dropping his aristocratic characteristics, slowly becoming involved in the radical struggle, subduing his impetuous individuality, eroding the certainties of his uncle and of Cecilia. His final act is the result of a consistent direction, a synthesis of his new radicalism and the best of the old noble qualities of his knight in shining armour style behaviour. But is Nevil's programme impossible? Is the only hope for the radicalisation of the establishment its own extinction, its self-sacrifice, its voluntary self-destruction? Will the change come after all not from the Nevils but from the anonymous mudbank life that has not been examined? Has the whole novel been focused on the wrong representative consciousness? Has it been the study of a class on the verge of extinction, rather than that or an emergent new radical impulse? Or is Nevil the deviant of that class doomed to extinction? Maybe the establishment will hold onto power and the radicals will be the sacrificial victims of that power's perpetuation. Meredith doesn't have the future perspective of a William Morris or a Jack London to be able to say, yes, repression will continue to dominate for years to come but in the end radicalism will triumph, bits of mudbank life will no longer be insignificant. His ending is deeply problematic, generating a series of questions, not any proclaimed hope or convinced faith.

Heart of Darkness: **Conrad's Critique of Imperialism**

Central to Joseph Conrad's vision in *Heart of Darkness* (1902) of what was happening in Africa is the masking of the work of brutal exploitation by the phrases of Christian enlightenment. And he puts his emphasis not on the mere hypocrisy of the Christian-civilizing phrasing used to mask the real activities, but on the ultimately inextricable identity of the Christian, the civilizing, the exploitative, the brutal. Marlow has, thanks to his aunt's arranging things, been appointed captain of a river steamer. He goes to see his aunt before he leaves for Africa:

I was going to take charge of a two-penny-halfpenny river-steamboat with a penny whistle attached! It appeared, however, I was also one of the Workers, with a capital - you know. Something like an emissary of light, something like a lower sort of apostle. There had been a lot of such rot let loose in print and talk just about that time, and the excellent woman, living right in the rush of all that humbug, got carried off her feet. She talked about 'weaning those ignorant millions from their horrid ways; till, upon my word, she made me quite uncomfortable. I ventured to hint that the Company was run for profit. (1. 12)

This play with the religious mission of the whites in Africa as the ideology for the trading activities runs throughout the book. Notice the pun on "capital" - the capital letter for Workers of enlightenment - but also the capital financing and structuring the work being done here. At the trading station upon the African river, Marlow sees the European Workers:

I saw this station, these men strolling aimlessly about in the sunshine of the yard. I asked myself sometimes what it all meant. They

wandered here and there with their absurd long staves in their hands, like a lot of faithless pilgrims bewitched inside a rotten fence. The word 'ivory' rang in the air, was whispered, was sighed. You would think they were praying to it. A taint of imbecile rapacity blew through it all, like a whiff from some corpse. (1. 23)

Visually, with their wooden staves, they look like medieval pilgrims. And the object of their pilgrimage, the shrine they are making for, the God they are praying to, is ivory. It is this displacement of religion by material acquisitiveness that Marlow sardonically notes in calling them pilgrims. But simultaneously the term records his dismissive attitude to the "unproductiveness" of religion. These workers are "strolling aimlessly about in the sunshine of the yard", not working; their inefficiency, their laziness, precludes Marlow's seeing them as workers as the company would see them. So the term captures both the mystification of the brutal, exploitative, avaricious bases of western Christianizing missions, the ideology of emissaries of light beneath which imperialism operates; and at the same time the idle, inefficient, unproductive characteristics of these supposed workers that equally upsets Marlow. And from this point on they are always referred to as pilgrims, with no comment, no emphasis. The context of their actions creates the emphasis, the irony. When the river steamboat is ambushed on the way to Kurtz, "A fusillade burst out under my feet. The pilgrims had opened with their Winchesters, and were simply squirting lead into that bush" (2. 46).

Calling the white ivory traders "pilgrims" is at an immediate level a contemptuous irony; but it opens out beyond irony as an example and exposure of the propagandist language of imperialism. It is one of a group of words whose ideological nature Conrad reveals. Sailing along the African coast Marlow is introduced to the "enemies":

Once, I remember, we came upon a man-of-war anchored off the bush. It appears the French had one of their wars going on thereabouts. Her ensign dropped limp like a rag; the muzzles of the long six-inch guns stuck out all over the low hull; the greasy, slimy swell swung her up lazily and let her down, swaying her thin masts. In the

empty immensity of earth, sky and water, there she was, incomprehensible, firing into a continent. Pop, would go one of the six-inch guns; a small flame would dart and vanish, a little white smoke would disappear, a tiny projectile would give a feeble screech and nothing happened. Nothing could happen. There was a touch of insanity in the proceeding, a sense of lugubrious drollery in the sight; and it was not dissipated by somebody on board assuring me earnestly there was a camp of natives - he called them enemies! - hidden out of sight somewhere. (1. 14)

They are "enemies" because they resist the commercial depredation of their land by Europeans. "Enemies" in any traditional aggressive sense, "enemies" in any way that would shake the civilization of Europe with invasion, they are certainly not, and Marlow's stress is on the absurdity of calling them "enemies". His values are old world, humane mystifications; he does not understand the nature of capitalism, the imperialist imperative. Unless continually new raw material sources are found, unless continually new markets are opened up, capitalist Europe will collapse; in resisting the commercial depredations of Africa by Europe, the natives are as much "enemies" as any traditional military "enemy" assembling at the border.

But Marlow does not see things in that way. His humane values of human decency are affronted by the imperialist term. He thinks things need not be done that way. Behind Conrad's horror at "the criminality of inefficiency and pure selfishness when tackling the civilizing work in Africa" - as he described the theme of *Heart of Darkness* to his publisher, William Blackwood - lies the assumption that the "civilizing" could be achieved efficiently, altruistically.

What shocks Marlow is that things are being done badly, not that they are being done. After "enemies", he encounters "criminals" when, arrived in Africa, he sees a line of six blacks carrying baskets on their heads, each with an iron collar on his neck, connected to each other by a chain.

They were called criminals, and the outraged law, like the bursting shells, had come to them, an insoluble mystery from the sea. (1. 16)

"The bursting shells . . . from the sea" associates the categorization of "criminals" with the earlier categorization of "enemies". Outside Kurtz's encampment, Marlow is introduced to a further category, "rebels". The Russian who is devoted to Kurtz explains to Marlow why there are all the heads mounted on poles:

These heads were the heads of rebels. I shocked him excessively by laughing. Rebels! What would be the next definition I was to hear? There had been enemies, criminals, workers - and these were rebels. (3. 59)

Marlow brings them all together again - the enemies, the criminals, the workers, and now the rebels. And his dissociation from the phrases is stressed by their being introduced with the prefatory, placing "called"; "he called them enemies", "they were called criminals". Marlow does not call them that, and he stresses that other people do the naming. The distance between the labels and realities is underlined by this "called" formula. This alien, European imperialist, trading invasion has brought its vocabulary. It is a vocabulary designed to justify the colonizers' theft of the wealth of Africa. By calling people enemies, rebels, workers, criminals, an appearance of European legality can be maintained on paper; the people back home in Europe can be assured that everything is being done properly, that law, justice, punishment are being brought for "weaning those ignorant millions from their horrid ways" (I. 12).

What upsets Marlow is the discrepancy between the sonorous phrases and the shoddy truths. In his vision, words like enemies, criminals, rebels, workers, pilgrims relate to high-flown realities; there *are* enemies of order, rebels against social stability, workers for the truth and so on. He cannot accept that the vocabulary that contains words like criminals, rebels, workers, and enemies, is merely the vocabulary of the victorious, the vocabulary of the people with the guns, the technology, the brute power - a vocabulary intended to validate the holding of power and to invalidate the defeated or exploited.

The culminative example of this vocabulary is in the manager's comment on the way Kurtz acquired the huge amounts of ivory. The manager expresses no regret or unhappiness at the human suffering, the murders, the theft that Kurtz caused. His sole concern

is the *economic.* The economic base of the civilizing mission is made unavoidable in the manager's comments. What upsets him is that Kurtz's methods have now alienated the blacks and made the district impossible for further exploitation. *Deplorable* is the word the manager uses: but what is deplorable is not the brutality, but the fact that the "trade" cannot be continued in the district any more:

'There is no disguising the fact, Mr. Kurtz has done more harm than good to the Company. He did not see the time was not ripe for vigorous action. Cautiously, cautiously - that's my principle. We must be cautious yet. The district is closed to us for a time. Deplorable! Upon the whole the trade will suffer. I don't deny there is a remarkable quantity of ivory - mostly fossil. We must save it, at all events-but look how precarious the position is-and why? Because the method is unsound.' 'Do you,' said I, looking at the shore, 'call it "unsound method"?' 'Without doubt,' he exclaimed hotly. 'Don't you?' ... ! 'No method at all,' I murmured after a while ... (3. 63)

Marlow is horrified that all the brutalities, massacres, thefts and other mysteriously nameless things that Kurtz has done can be reduced to the colourless, and economically oriented, euphemism of "unsound method". He is shocked that the human issues, the moral issues are expressed by the inhuman, technical, practical terminology. This is the political use of language. In one sense it conceals the actualities of what has happened: "unsound method" is the distanced, sanitized, technical, alienated way of expressing a reality of atrocities. But the further horror is that this sort of language all too clearly reveals what is going on - it reveals the imperialist and capitalist way of putting economics first, humanity second.

Marlow's distaste for the way in which the white colonialists refer to the blacks as enemies, criminals and rebels is a mark of his humane value-system. His disgust reaches its peak when the manager blandly refers to Kurtz's "unsound method". At that Marlow cannot even face the manager, he turns away so that he is "looking at the shore", and he comments "I had never breathed an atmosphere so vile." But what Marlow finds vile is the manager's bland terminology. His distaste for that is a mark of his

humanity - but it is also a mark of his mystification. It reveals his assumption that "civilization" could be undertaken "decently". It reveals his unawareness of the nature of capitalism, his wish to avoid the realities of imperialism. He does not want to believe that economic values are dominant values. And his mystification is revealed in his uncritical commitment to the work ethic, to "efficiency". It is the "criminality of inefficiency" that horrified Conrad about imperialism in Africa. If the "civilizing work in Africa" were tackled efficiently, unselfishly, wouldn't that make all the difference? But what *Heart of Darkness* gradually reveals, is that the "civilizing work" is inseparable from criminality, inefficiency, and selfishness, it cannot be anything else, that is the nature of imperialism.

But first of all Marlow encounters the inefficiency:

I came upon a boiler wallowing in the grass, then found a path leading up the hill. It turned aside for the boulders, and also for an undersized railway truck lying there on its back with its wheels in the air. One was off. The thing looked as dead as the carcass of some animal. I came upon more pieces of decaying machinery, a stack of rusty rails. (1. 16)

When the steamboat Marlow is to take up river has been holed, he works out that it can easily be repaired. But there are no rivets to repair it with, and though he keeps sending orders for them they never arrive. The lack of rivets where they are needed serves as an example for Marlow of the unworkmanlike inefficiency of the whole organization.

Rivets I wanted. There were cases of them down at the coast – cases piled up – burst - split! You kicked a loose rivet at every second step in that station on the hillside. Rivets had rolled into the grove of death. You could fill your pockets with rivets for the trouble of stooping down - and there wasn't one rivet to be found where it was wanted. (1. 28)

Marlow consequently has to sit around waiting, idle.

No, I don't like work. I had rather laze about and think of all the fine things that can be done. I don't like work - no man does - but I like what is in the work - the chance to find yourself. Your own reality - for yourself, not for others - what no other man can ever know. They can only see the mere show, and never can tell what it really means. (1. 29)

The mystique of work that Marlow puts forward is that work is a way to find yourself. He admires it against the laziness and inefficiency of the whites in the trading company, he admires it as a way to self-knowledge. However, the specifics of work in *Heart of Darkness* are not as abstract, as contextually pure as Marlow would seem to imply. Work cannot but involve a relationship between the worker and his environment. The social context in which Marlow works qualifies the "pure" self-fulfilling work he does. It is not that he denies this - simply he seems unaware of it. Looking at the world map in the company headquarters, Marlow remarks on the areas coloured red - the traditional colouring on maps for British territory, for the old Empire ;

'There was a vast amount of red - good to see at any time, because one knows that some real work is done in there ... (1. 10)

Work, "real work" - efficiency, and the British Empire are all associated for Marlow. And it is often asserted that Conrad had a simple, unqualified admiration for things British, especially the Empire.

In *Heart of Darkness*, however, the concepts of work, empire and simple seamanlike efficiency come in for some questioning. Heading up river to find Kurtz, Marlow comes across a deserted hut

and by the door I picked up a book. It had lost its cover, and the pages had been thumbed into a state of extremely dirty softness; but the back had been lovingly stitched afresh with white cotton thread, which looked clean yet. It was an extraordinary find. Its title was, *An Inquiry into some Points of Seamanship,* by a man Towser, Towson - some such name - Master in His Majesty's Navy . . . Not a very enthralling book; but at the first glance you could see there was a singleness of intention, an honest concern for the right way of

going to work, which made these humble pages, thought out so many years ago, luminous with another than a professional light. The simple old sailor, with his talk of chains and purchases, made me forget the jungle and the pilgrims in a delicious sensation of having come upon something unmistakably real. Such a book being there was wonderful enough; but still more astounding were the notes pencilled in the margin, and plainly referring to the text. I couldn't believe my eyes! They were in cipher! Yes, it looked like cipher. Fancy a man lugging with him a book of that description into this nowhere and studying it - and making notes - in cipher at that! It was an extravagant mystery. (2. 38-9)

Efficiency, hard work, the serious study of unexciting minutiae, the book written by a British naval officer, study going on in the demoralizing jungle: all the evidence that leads Marlow to thinking he has found traces of another Marlow, another serious, civilized, work-ethic oriented, seaman. And then he finds the owner is the ridiculous Russian with the patched clothes, the Russian who looks like a harlequin, a clown, the Russian whose values are not at all those of the hard-working efficient seaman, but of the inefficient, erratic, naive romantic. And the code, the cipher turns out to be merely notes made in Russian:

The glamour of youth enveloped his parti-coloured rags, his destitution, his loneliness, the essential desolation of his futile wanderings. For months - for years - his life hadn't been worth a day's purchase; and there he was gallantly, thoughtlessly alive, to all appearance indestructible solely by the virtue of his few years and of his unreflecting audacity. I was seduced into something like admiration - like envy ... His need was to exist, and to move onwards at the greatest possible risk, and with a maximum of privation. If the absolutely pure, uncalculating, unpractical spirit of adventure had ever ruled a human being, it ruled this be-patched youth. (3. 55-6)

The images of efficiency, of practicality are exposed as illusion. Marlow has misinterpreted the data.

And the misinterpretation casts doubt on the whole concept of

the work ethic, the efficient simple seaman. Do such people really exist? Is it all so simple as Marlow wants to imagine? Early in the novel we are shown Marlow's admiration for the chief accountant, rigged out in

a high starched collar, white cuffs, a light alpaca jacket, snowy trousers, a clean necktie, and varnished boots . . . I respected the fellow, Yes; I respected his collars, his vast cuffs, his brushed hair. His appearance was certainly that of a hairdresser's dummy; but in the great demoralisation of the land he kept up his appearance. (1.18)

Typically Marlow admires the efficiency, discipline, order amidst all the demoralization, ruin and decay. Yet even in his admiration, his phrasing introduces doubts. The chief accountant "kept up his appearance"; "keeping up appearances" is so close to the illusion of civilizing work that the Company propagandizes it is carrying on. The emptiness, the lie involved in keeping up appearances, is implied in the very efficiency of the chief accountant. And his efficiency is, after all, all implied in his dress, in his appearance. Just as the inefficiency, the dilettantism, of the Russian, is revealed by his appearance. The suggestion lurks that the clothes are mere illusion, that the values they emblematize are mere illusion too. Is there any such thing as pure work, as simple efficiency? How can work or efficiency be other than tainted by this imperial context?

The annotator of *An Inquiry into some Points of Seamanship* turns out to be the Dostoyevskian simpleton, the romantic Russian wanderer, totally inefficient. More than that, he turns out to be the most loyal supporter and advocate of Mr Kurtz. How are the values of decent work and Mr Kurtz compatible except through the misinterpretation of the annotated copy of the *Inquiry?*

Yet there is another way of looking at the issue. For one of the things that especially fascinated Marlow about Kurtz, was Kurtz's supposed efficiency; the fantastically high yields of ivory from his station. Everything that Marlow hears about Kurtz when he arrives suggests that Kurtz is different from the other white pilgrims. And since the objective qualities of the other whites are clear enough - their laziness, inefficiency, brutality, wanton murderousness - Marlow can readily assume that Kurtz must be their antithesis. Kurtz is both efficient, and a believer in

"civilization". Marlow is disgusted by the "civilization" demonstrated by the pilgrims. He assumes Kurtz offers the real thing.
Marlow one night overhears the manager of the station downriver from Kurtz talking to his uncle who is leading the dubious Eldorado Exploring Expedition:

'And the pestiferous absurdity of his talk,' the manager says of Kurtz. 'He bothered me enough when he was here. "Each station should be like a beacon on the road towards better things, a centre for trade of course, but also for humanising, improving, instructing." Conceive you - that ass!' (2. 33)

Marlow's reaction is one of contempt for the Eldorado explorers and excited expectation at the prospect of meeting Kurtz. Kurtz must be good because of the hostility he provokes in the other whites.

But Marlow's assumption that Kurtz will somehow be not only different but better than the other pilgrims, derives not from any demonstrable facts but from his need to believe that someone, somewhere must be good. Working for the trading company whose modes of operation are everywhere and inescapably clear to view, Marlow needs to believe that at least one of the other employees is a man of integrity, that it is possible to be a man of integrity in such an outfit. If there isn't a man of integrity somewhere, then that leaves Marlow as the only decent person; and that seems unpersuasive. If there is no one else of integrity, then Marlow will unavoidably be forced back to examining his own involvements in the company; is it likely that he alone is unsullied by the imperialist corruptions? Can he persuade himself that he alone is true, honest, efficient, honourable?

We do not need to come up with ideas of Kurtz as Marlow's *alter ego*, or any other critical sophistications, to explain the role Kurtz occupies in Marlow's narrative. Marlow's fascination with Kurtz, his need to believe in Kurtz, can be accounted for quite adequately within a reading of the novel that stresses the objective realism of the theme of imperialism. Colonial exploitation is the setting; Marlow needs to believe that Kurtz is uncorrupted by the situation in which he works. The horror of the realization of the truth about Kurtz is the horror of Marlow's having to realize

how utterly unconvincing are his own, Marlow's, protestations of a belief in pure work, pure efficiency, pure duty. His work, efficiency and duty contribute quite simply and quite directly to the furtherance of the imperialist exploitation - the objective evidences of which so horrify and disgust him. Marlow's "work" ethic, his premium on efficiency and practicality, is another mystification - like the civilizing mission of the company; it is something with which to delude other people, and more frightening, something with which to delude oneself; it is an ideology for exploitative imperialism. Marlow's obsession with work, with just doing a job well, is a way of avoiding recognizing just what his work is in the service of.

In *Nostromo* Conrad presents a third world society with some considerably developed, Western style political superstructure; and shows the forces of British and United States economic involvement, Italian radicalism, European intellectualism operating with and against indigenous forces. The result is a political arena that can be seen as embodying the political forces of not only the colonial third world, but also the internal forces of the exploitive imperial powers. *Nostromo* can arguably be held to embody the politics of Europe, or the U.S.A., as well as of the third world.

In *Heart of Darkness* the setting is an Africa more recently colonized, without the developed political superstructure. But the forces at work there are those same forces that work in the political societies of Europe. Jonah Raskin noted how Conrad

came to believe that the true nature of European society was revealed in the colonies (and also in revolutions) and in his fiction he focuses on men in the tropics and on revolutionaries. It is not accidental but rather the outcome of his total outlook that his best novel, *Nostromo* (1904), in which he presents an image of the modern world, brings these two concerns into focus in its portrayal of revolution in Latin America. The early Marx noted that 'The profound hypocrisy and inherent barbarism of bourgeois civilization lies unveiled before our eyes' in the 'colonies, where it goes naked'; more recently Sartre noted that 'the strip-tease of our humanism' took place in the tropics, and that 'In the colonies the truth stood naked.' Conrad is a long way from Marx, Marxism, and Sartre, but

he shares the notion that in the colonies one saw the truth about Western society. (*Journal of Contemporary History* , 2, 1967, 115; Marx, *On Colonialism,* 88; Sartre, *Fanon*, 7. 21)

Conrad establishes the integral connexion between the colonial situation and the European situation by having Marlow's story set within a wider narration. Marlow is telling his story to four other men on a ship in the Thames estuary. This isn't a setting simply to fill the story out. The story we know from Conrad's letters was longer than he had originally estimated to *Blackwood's Magazine;* he had promised 20,000 words, but when serialized in 1899 it turned out nearer 40,000 words. The setting makes important connexions of imagery and theme with Marlow's story.

The air was dark above Gravesend, and farther back still seemed condensed into a mournful gloom, brooding motionless over the biggest, and the greatest, town on earth. (1. 3)

The "mournful gloom" relates to the darkness of the heart of the African darkness, the pervasive imagery of Africa. Gravesend is a town on the Thames estuary, but in this novel about darkness and death, in this novel where we are soon to see Marlow in the "sepulchral", tomb-like, city that houses the headquarters of the trading company (1. 9), grave's end takes on deathly associations. Later the narrator offers a further description of London:

farther west on the upper reaches the place of the monstrous town was still marked ominously on the sky, a brooding gloom in the sunshine, a lurid glare under the stars. (1. 5)

"Monstrous" suggests not only something large but in the context of words like "ominously" and of the emphatic darkness imagery - the "brooding gloom"- associations of something wrong, something evil, something grotesque develop. The description associates London with the ominous quality of the African material. And just as with the African material we soon find black and white become utterly interchangeable in their metaphorical denotations, so here the darkness-light contrast is already locked into paradox. In the daylight, the "sunshine", London is marked by a "brooding gloom", the smoke of capitalist

industry darkening the bright sky. In the darkness of night it is marked by a "lurid glare", the artificial light of capitalist technology and of all-night industry creating a hellish light in the sky.

There is something amiss, something unnatural about London, heart of the British Empire, just as there is something amiss, something unnatural, about the feel of the imperialist exploited Africa. There is something amiss about both - and both are identified with each other in being associated with, in possessing, in creating this same wrongness.

Conrad was not alone in noticing the parallels between the Congo and industrial London. Introducing Jack London's 1903 account of London's East End, *The People of the Abyss,* Jack Lindsay remarks:

It is hard for us to realise how completely clothes, manners, talk, attitudes to every aspect of life divided the people of England into two nations; and the middle-class person who ventured into the jungle of lowlife felt like an explorer in darkest Africa. Not for nothing had William Booth, founder of the Salvation Army, called his book on the slums *In Darkest England and the Way Out* (1890). Asking 'Why Darkest England', he gave an account of Stanley in the Congo and went on, 'As there is a darkest Africa, is there not also a darkest England?' Englishmen could 'discover within a stone's throw of our cathedrals and palaces similar horrors to those which Stanley has found existing in the great Equatorial forest.' (6-7)

The horror, the horror.

The group of listeners with Marlow are not a simply random collection. They consist of "the director of companies", "the lawyer" and "the accountant" - deliberately chosen as emblematic representatives of trade, industry, capitalism. The fourth person is the narrator, given no occupation by name, but since he tells us the story that we are reading it is sensible to assume he is a storyteller, novelist, artist - the ideologist for his society, the analyst and apologist for capitalism and imperialism. How far he is analyst, how far critic, how far apologist is never spelled out; he is like Conrad, he more or less is Conrad. He gives us the story, we draw our conclusions from the evidence he has chosen to give us.

The listeners are not even given names - just their functions, their occupations. Their anonymity stresses that they exist only in and for their social roles: they are the equivalents to the people behind the company that employed Marlow, the company responsible for the spoliation of that part of Africa that Marlow was in.

This achieves two things. It stresses a continuum between the African adventure Marlow tells and the people listening to it. The shared imagery and the selection of occupations for the listeners stresses that the way bourgeois capitalist society is conducted in England is on the same principles as those in Africa. Maybe things are a little less dramatic in England, but structurally they are comparable.

And secondly, though the novel is about an anonymous part of Africa, the same criticisms can be applied to those parts of Africa controlled from England. Conrad avoids explicitly criticizing the British imperial adventures; but the imagery and structure of the book, by choosing those listeners, and setting the storytelling on the Thames, the commercial waterway of London, centre of the British imperial trade, stress the identity of the British empire in Africa and the anonymous area in which Marlow worked.

The very unspecificness of the area in which Marlow worked is important. Marlow never says that the headquarters of the company were in Brussels; it is simply a "sepulchral city". He never calls the river the Congo. This was not from discretion, from unwillingness to name the Congo. Conrad may well have wanted to avoid identification with a particular political campaign - and the campaign was underway by the time *Heart of Darkness* came out in book form in 1902. He did not want to ally himself with radicals, missionaries and others who uttered anti-Congo propaganda. But in avoiding that specific identification, Conrad also allowed a ready transferability of his story. He does not restrict it to one country's, one monarch's, imperial adventure. He stressed to his publisher that the theme was "not topically treated". To have treated it "topically" might have seemed to limit his account of colonialism to the Congo alone: King Leopold and the Belgians bad, everyone else good. He does quite the opposite from that. He stresses the cosmopolitanism of the colonial exploitation. He involves everyone, all Europe. Marlow goes to Africa on a French steamer (1. 13). He goes up river on a ship captained by a Swede (1. 15). The man Marlow is replacing

was a Dane (1. 9). The man who tells Marlow about Kurtz is a Russian who had fitted himself out for his journey from a Dutch trader (2. 54-5). And Kurtz himself, the end of Marlow's journey, the summation of all this,

had been educated partly in England, and - as he was good enough to say himself - his sympathies were in the right place. His mother was half-English, his father was half-French. All Europe contributed to the making of Kurtz. (2. 50)

Marlow doesn't specify the nationalities of the other halves of his parents, but he does tell us at one stage that Kurtz is a German word.

So we have French, German, Danish, Swedish, Dutch, Russian and English. England is not excluded; the English may be more pious about their civilizing mission in the Empire, and Marlow shares the piety - admiring the red parts of the map where good work is done (1. 10). But Kurtz, of course, had a more pious attitude to his imperial work than the other traders. England is present ambiguously - but no less firmly for that. "You understand it was a Continental concern, that Trading society", Marlow says with careful ambiguity (1. 8). The idiomatic English use of the word "continental" is dissociative - separating England from the dubious things that happen "on the continent", across the English Channel over in Europe. But there is another reading possible. The introduction of "continental" here can be taken as stressing that all Europe is involved, that it is a "continental" not merely a national exploitation, and that England is part of the continent of Europe geographically, the mere channels of sea merely concealing the cultural, economic and geographical realities.

But how far is the pervasive sense of evil in *Heart of Darkness* ascribable to the circumstances of imperialist exploitation, and to the connexions of that exploitation with the capitalist exploitation within Europe? There is certainly sufficient brutality, sufficient death, sufficient corruption associated with the European exploitation of Africa, presented clearly enough in Marlow's story. A number of critics have complained, however, that there is a mystifying vagueness about the evil - particularly in relation to Kurtz's mysterious practices. F. R. Leavis argues in *The Great*

Tradition that Conrad overdoes and so undercuts the horror. The narrated detail fully establishes the evil:

> By means of this art of vivid essential record, in terms of things seen and incidents experienced by a main agent in the narrative, and particular contacts and exchanges with other human agents the over-whelming sinister and fantastic 'atmosphere' is engendered. (196)

But, Leavis continues,

> Hadn't he, we find ourselves asking, overworked 'inscrutable', 'inconceivable', 'unspeakable' and that kind of word already? - yet still they recur . . . The same vocabulary, the same adjectival insistence upon inexpressible and incomprehensible mystery, is applied to the evocation of human profundities and spiritual horrors; to magnifying a thrilled sense of the unspeakable potentialities of the human soul. The actual effect is not to magnify but rather to muffle. (196-7)

Leavis never once mentions imperialism or colonialism or capitalism or exploitation in his discussion of *Heart of Darkness.* His approach is deliberately "moral" (that word recurs), deliberately mystifying in its purporting to be apolitical. Nonetheless, he does incisively indicate how the objective socio-political detail of the novel is muffled by Conrad's own mystifications, "the inconceivable mystery" (200) that has lured readers and commentators away from the objective horrors. And so encouraged by Conrad, commentators struggle off in pursuit of some ineffable will-o'-the wisp of mystery: or find the whole thing ridiculous - as Albert Guerard does:

> On this literal plane, and when the events are so abstracted from the dream-sensation conveying them, it is hard to take Marlow's plight very seriously. Will he, the busy captain and moralizing narrator, also revert to savagery, go ashore for a howl and a dance, indulge in unspeakable lusts? (39)

Having established the objective detail of imperialist

exploitation in Africa, it is as if Conrad recoils in horror from what he has been writing and proceeds to divert attention from it. Jonah Raskin remarked:

literary critics have neglected imperialism and have transformed the novella into a timeless myth about the exploration of the human soul and the metaphysical power of evil. These are only some of the more radical interpretations; there are others which, if they shed some light, still distort the novella, which gives us a concrete record of Belgian colonialism in the Congo and transforms a personal experience into a myth about imperial decadence. (109)

But the critics have simply followed the lures that Conrad has built into this novel. It is not accidental that so much critical activity devoted to this novella has been to turn away from looking at the manager who talks of Kurtz's "unsound method". The displacement is structural to the book. Having encountered the horrors of imperialist, economically-based exploitation, Marlow recoils and commits himself to a pursuit of a mystery, to an idea of Kurtz who must, he believes, be different from all this. Having been told by the manager that Kurtz's "method is unsound", "it seemed to me I had never breathed an atmosphere so vile, and I turned mentally to Kurtz for relief - positively for relief" (3.63). Yet already at this point in the story, Marlow has encountered the heads of rebels impaled outside Kurtz's house. "They would have been even more impressive, those heads on the stakes, if their faces had not been turned to the house" (3. 58). It is a brilliant touch, the heads facing towards the house so that Kurtz can look at their expressions. Marlow comments

I am not disclosing any trade secrets. In fact the manager said afterwards that Mr. Kurtz's methods had ruined the district. I have no opinion on that point, but I want you clearly to understand that there was nothing exactly profitable in these heads being there. They only showed that Mr. Kurtz lacked restraint in the gratification of his various lusts, that there was something wanting in him-some smaller matter which, when the pressing need arose, could not be found under his magnificent eloquence. Whether he knew of this deficiency himself I can't say. I think the knowledge came to him

at last - only at the very last. But the wilderness had found him out early, and had taken on him a terrible revenge for the fantastic invasion. I think it had whispered to him things about himself which he did not know, things of which he had no conception till he took counsel with this great solitude - and the whisper had proved irresistibly fascinating. It echoed loudly within him because he was hollow at the core... (3. 58-9)

Mere exploitation, mere brutality, mere imperialism has been widened out into some larger, cosmic horror. The great solitude, the hollowness within has become Marlow's subject. The mere exploitative evil done by Kurtz has been replaced in Marlow's fascinated speculations by some cosmic sense of human futility. The manager may demonstrate the corruption of petty economics, bureaucracies, exploitative trade; but Marlow finds Kurtz more interesting because Kurtz represents the corruption of all human endeavour.

The meaning of *Heart of Darkness* becomes deliberately ambiguous. Kurtz regresses from civilized values. Perhaps there are no civilized values anyway, perhaps they are all illusory. We have seen what the "pilgrims" were really like. Is Kurtz's savagery any the worse? The novel is structured on a series of contrasts between images of black and white-white Europeans and black Africans; at an individual level, Kurtz's white fiancée and his black mistress; at a physical level, the "white sepulchre" of the European capital, the darkness of Africa; at an ideological level, the enlightenment of civilization that Kurtz espouses ("each station should be like a beacon on the road towards better things"), and the darkness of primitive rituals that he ends up participating in, presiding "at certain midnight dances ending with unspeakable rites". Very rapidly the basic distinctions of white's white and black's black become confused. Black and white seem so absolute, such a basic, traditional good-evil binary confrontation. Conrad contrives to blur all distinctions, to make them interchangeable. What difference is there between the white "pilgrims" shooting their rifles at the blacks for a jolly lark, and the unspeakable rites of darkness in which Kurtz engages? In the end is Kurtz still trying to get more ivory, or does he despise the ivory trade at which he is so successful; is he still trying to

"civilize" and finding new values in the black culture, or has he identified with the black culture in a war against white culture? Is the black culture morally better than the white exploitative imperialism; or does it offer even greater potential for evil - black magic, sorcery, blood rituals? Are there any moral distinctions that can be made?

At the end of the book Marlow tells Kurtz's "intended", his European fiancée, that Kurtz died with her name on his lips. In fact Kurtz died saying "The horror, the horror".

Marlow continually tells us how he hates lies. One reason he hates the whole African experience is because of the lies the trading company has put out about what is happening there. So when Marlow himself lies, does this mean he has become corrupted like everyone else? The darkness has taken over Marlow too? Or has he now realized the futility of everything, and sees no value in dispelling her illusions? Or do we take Kurtz's "intended" symbolically - not so much as an individual fiancée but as a symbol for the homeland, for Europe? The people in Europe are never told and do not want to know the truth about what happens in colonial Africa, South-East Asia, South America. As long as someone will run the show, they avoid having to know what actually happens. And yet they *must* know if they think about it. How else can the work be done, except in the violent and brutal and exploitative way that it is done? The intended asks Marlow to repeat Kurtz's last words:

I was on the point of crying at her, 'Don't you hear them?' The dusk was repeating them in a persistent whisper all around us, in a whisper that seemed to swell menacingly like the first whisper of a rising wind. 'The horror! the horror!' (3. 79)

The words are there if she wants to hear them. The truth is unavoidable. But the truth can be temporarily blotted out by the mystification of progress, beacons of enlightenment, civilization.

Similarly Marlow doesn't tell his four listeners the truth about *their* colony, about England's involvement in Africa, India, Malaysia . . . even though the words of the horror are clearly enough resounding around them from his narrative if they want to hear them. But they don't; they prefer not to admit and recognize the truth.

And Marlow chooses not to insist on the truth. "I couldn't. I could not tell her. It would have been too dark - too dark altogether ..." (3. 79). The darkness of evil, the darkness of ignorance, the darkness of confusion, or all three, or more still?

Conrad's movement in *Heart of Darkness* is from European mystification about "civilizing" work in Africa, to a revelation of the realities of imperialism. But he does not go from that revelation to a political programme. Instead he moves from objective revelation to a new mystification. He turns from the materials of political analysis, to cosmic despair. He doesn't relate the horrors of imperialism back to the nature of capitalism, but to "human nature". He takes refuge in a *fin de siècle* despair that abandons all hope of improvement, of change; he surrenders the world to the trading companies and the managers and the accountants, directors of companies and lawyers. He sees through the ideological mystifications, and then lapses back into a despair that in essence is conservative.

It is a persuasive conservatism just because of its very lack of specific analysis. He shies away from continuing his analysis of the objective details of imperialist exploitation. In *Nostromo* he attempts some specific political analysis, and his conservatism is obtrusive; his structuring of possibilities becomes unpersuasive, he all too clearly has a particular political stance to expound. At least in *Heart of Darkness* his shying away from further analysis of imperialism prevents him from expounding his own politics - so the *Heart of Darkness* is more powerful, less manipulated, more resonant of meanings. Nonetheless, the cosmic despair of the book is in effect a conservative sidestepping of the issues raised; it is a deliberate avoidance of following through the implications of the objective data of the observations of what was happening in Africa. The specifics are finally subordinated to the non-topical, eternal, cosmic despair that was Conrad's hopeless vision:

Sometimes we came upon a station close by the bank, clinging to the skirts of the unknown, and the white men rushing out of a tumbledown hovel, with great gestures of joy and surprise and welcome,

seemed very strange-had the appearance of being held there captive
by a spell. The word 'ivory' would ring in the air for a while -
and on we went again into the silence, along empty reaches, round
the still bends, between the high walls of our winding way, reverberating
in hollow claps the ponderous beat of the stern-wheel. Trees,
trees, millions of trees, massive, immense, running up high; and at
their foot, hugging the bank against the stream, crept the little begrimed
steamboat, like a sluggish beetle crawling on the floor of a
lofty portico. It made you feel very small, very lost, and yet it was
not altogether depressing, that feeling. After all, if you were small,
the grimy beetle crawled on - which was just what you wanted it to
do. (2. 35)

It is with passages like this, recurrent passages, that Conrad expresses
the futility of existence; the smallness, the minuteness of
man's efforts and man's aspirations, amidst the great indifference
of nature. This is the omnipresent note of the book; the sense of
how little impression man is making on the vast immensity of
nature - the size of the trees, the lushness of the vegetation, the
hugeness of the continent. In the context of the huge indifference
of things, any of man's illusions, ambitions, values and delusions
are equally ridiculous - hollow, empty, like the hollowness Kurtz
found within himself, like the hollow claps of the stern wheel.
We have moved from a concrete expose of imperialism to a
despairing view of all human endeavour.

The Politics of *Nostromo*

There is a certain grand simplicity about Joseph Conrad's *Nostromo* (1904). The characters are simple, their personal characteristics few and firmly defined. There are the clear, simple settings - the lighter in the empty gulf, the lighthouse on the island - and there is an emblematic simplicity of action - Ribiera's arrival on the mule, Hirsch's clinging to the anchor. It is partly an epic simplicity, associable with the recurrent epic epithets applied to the characters, and even with the opening *in media res.* But it is a simplicity, too, that free from the confusing accretion of detail claims for the novel a transferability from, or indeed a transcendence of, any particular geographical setting, facilitating the expansion of the 'tale of the seaboard', as it is subtitled, to that vision of the 'modern world in microcosm' registered by so many commentators. Ford Madox Ford called it 'a political parable' (90-1), Eloise Knapp Hay described it as 'a tightly organized political fable' (202). The implications of 'fable' and 'parable' are those that associate with the novel's spareness and simplicity of image and event, with the features that claim the ready transferability of the political themes beyond a limitedly specific South American setting. But there are implications also that what we might have is a confirmation of received ideas, the opposite of any open exploration.

This suggestion of the preconceived fable, of something prejudged, is borne out by a consideration of the novel's structure. The shifts in chronology and narration are not such as to suggest the events are beyond anybody's comprehension, or that there are a number of different and equally valid interpretations of them; rather the structure helps to confirm the message of the fable. We hear first of the fated treasure seekers - and the theme of corruption by wealth is there as a moral at once. As soon as we move into the action, the first event we are shown is the failure and conclusion of Ribiera' s regime. It is shown in defeat before we even see it begin: a defeat, not even an ironically shown inauguration of

the regime. And by further recapitulation and reference in the course of the novel we learn of Guzman Bento's rule preceding Ribiera's, and of Montero's rebellion against Ribiera. Ribiera's is just one regime doomed to collapse, and the first thing we see is the collapse. Irving Howe's argument in *Politics and the Novel* that *Nostromo* verifies Trotsky's theory of permanent revolution depends on a reconstruction of the 'actual' chronology. But it is a chronology deliberately disrupted to destroy any impression that one revolution leads forward to another, that there is any progression. In the novel as we read it, memories from one regime are intermixed with the present and future of others, so that any historic perspective is deliberately erased. The suggestion is that it doesn't matter; that there is no advance, only cyclic repetition.

The static, fable-like quality that the structure creates is supported by the characterization; each individual is used to represent a certain quality that can readily describe his or her role. So it is that Leavis could write in *The Great Tradition* of 'Emilia Gould, standing for personal relations and disinterested human sympathy' (212), 'Captain Mitchell represents the merchant service' (214), 'Fear (personified by the stowaway Hirsch)' (217). This suggests an analysis of the novel near to the terms of medieval allegory, and suggests certain limitations in this political novel's method. If characters are standing for and representing such sure, simple qualities, there can be no real complexity; there can be complexity only in the sense of complication - more characters standing for further qualities. The issue develops into one of what sort of picture of society would we expect from a novelist who is not concerned with individuals, who is using people to represent or personify concepts? He must be dealing less with people in society than with society as illustrated in certain abstracted characteristics. His mode is necessarily that of the fable.

Yet there is a certain sense in which *Nostromo* purports to be or has been represented as being by critical consensus - a realistic novel. Its ultimate political judgements are taken to be validated by the documentary material of the realistic fiction that it presented. If, however, we argue that the novel is not realistic, that the characters are fable-representational, not realistic in the mode of bourgeois, psychological realism, then the political conclusion of the novel has to be encountered as a theory, a model, that has been presented in

fictional form - and open to discussion as to the validity or persuasiveness of it as a model. The conclusion isn't to be approached as a conclusion drawn from the evidence given. No evidence has been given in the sense of the characters' lives providing documentation; the characters are the counters employed to show Conrad's political model in action. A futuristic utopia or anti-utopia is obviously a fable, a model - even if drawn from projections of documentary data in the present. *Nostromo* is no less a model - even though its toying with the realistic mode implies that it is a meditation on actual experience, the summary of specific histories, specific psychologies. Conrad's reputation as exotic traveller provides an aura for *Nostromo* even before we begin reading: we open the novel with the concept of a much travelled, much experienced seaman thinker. But Conrad barely knew Central and South America. He could draw on the realities of Africa for *Heart of Darkness* - and the memories of those realities compete with his cosmic pessimism for the focus of the tale. With the milieu of *Nostromo* there are no remembered realities, no observed psychologies in such situations: it is pure projection; the cosmic pessimism has nothing competing with it.

What we notice first about the characters in *Nostromo* is their representing something - the quality they 'stand for.' Then we notice their emptiness - the one feature given, there is little else to them. And third we notice the lack of connexion of the characters with each other; they all exist in near-isolation. Features that the characters stand for are wearily reiterated. Mrs. Gould's function is almost to underline moral points about human contact - the tragedy of Charles through his failure to maintain contact with her, the salvation of Monygham by his devotion to her. And the values of the personal relations Mrs. Gould stands for are values of isolation, not social and. political relationships but values consciously outside any society. What we have of Mrs. Gould is summarized in the last chapter:

With a measured swish of her long train, flashing jewels and the shimmer of silk, with her delicate head bowed as if under the weight of a mass of fair hair, in which the silver threads were lost, the 'first lady of Sulaco', as Captain Mitchell used to describe her, moved along the lighted corridor, wealthy beyond

great dreams of wealth, considered, loved, respected, honoured, and as solitary as any human being had ever been, perhaps, on this earth. (III.13; 555)

Everything is there, of course - and everything is this little: wealth, a lot of hair, a slender neck, walking along the corridors, loneliness. And Mrs. Gould is evoked for the novel by these few images - and the not really pointed, or pointedly used, phrase from Captain Mitchell. In addition there is the silver imagery, brought in everywhere and here not making any point; though at this late stage in the novel the word silver cannot be used without seeming to claim some symbolic underlining. The reference to the most solitary person in the world is both unpersuasive and too merely assertive, assertive in that we do not see Mrs. Gould's loneliness; she reminds us of Gwendolen Harleth or Isabel Archer or Mrs. Transome - the characteristics of them are echoed, Mrs. Transome pacing the corridors through *Felix Holt,* Isabel's light figure dragging behind it a mass of drapery through *The Portrait of a Lady*. But they were shown, their empty lives given an imaginative body. With Mrs. Gould there is only this assertion that she is as solitary as any human being had ever been, with a qualifying 'perhaps'. And except for the flashback to her marriage proposal, and the regeneration of Monygham, there is little else to Mrs. Gould. And because there is so little, the rehabilitation of Monygham fails to convince; not because it is doubtful in principle that he could be so reclaimed but that because there is so little to Mrs. Gould, because we see so little of her, because her character is confined to the feature she 'represents', we are not convinced that she could cause such a change in Monygham. He must be saved by personal concern, and this requires some indication of personal qualities in the person who is to be. the concerned one.

For a novel dealing with social and political complexities, Mrs. Gould's inadequacies are even more noticeable. The simplicity of her portrayal allows her to stand for her simple moral positives; but such moral simplicity is inadequate and often irrelevant to the complex world Conrad would seem to be portraying. She is, of course, intended to be isolated, and so is Monygham. What salvation they achieve is outside society. The fact that we see Mrs. Gould in no social relationships that would show her qualities as an

individual, weakens her part in the novel. But more than this, her separation from society needs some social explanation if she is to be a major figure in a novel dealing with modern society and politics. But Mrs. Gould's isolation is not unique. Antonia and Decoud are similarly isolated - as that scene in which they look together from the balcony to the street indicates:

> Towards the plaza end of the street the glowing coals in the brazeros of the market women cooking their evening meal gleamed red along the edge of the pavement. A man appeared without a sound in the light of the street lamp, showing the inverted triangle of his bordered poncho, square on his shoulders hanging to a point below his knees. (II.5; 185)

Arnold Kettle has argued that the people in the street 'are not merely picturesque (though they are that), they fill out involuntarily the social picture; they give a warmth and significance to the politics that Antonia and Decoud (all too abstractly) have been discussing' (11.74). But the social picture isn't filled out. What the episode illustrates are those faults of social awareness that Conrad sees in Decoud - the uninvolvement, the compartmentalizing, the distance: alienation. It's a fine image, the two on the balcony, of their social and emotional distance from the people. But Conrad omits any exploration of that distance, any explanation of the economic factors that pauperize the people and allow the two upper bourgeoisie on the balcony to live at ease. The elite are shown in their isolation, but the people are not shown at all except as colored extras. Their social consciousness, their sense of their place in the society and their activity in it are not shown, except from the distant viewpoint of the Antonias and Decouds. Similarly Jonah Raskin points out in *The Mythology of Imperialism* how 'no Africans, no Third World men or women, are major characters in *Heart of Darkness.* They are a moving force in history, they are a power, but they are not seen as specific individuals.' (158)

We see a lot of characters who are isolated, which shows clearly enough the alienation this milieu creates. But who are we shown actively involved with people in running the society? Despite the recurrent idea of isolation in Conrad, we do not have here any meaningful portrayal of man's alienation from society. There is no

society shown from which to be alienated. This may be a deliberate portrayal of the fragmentation of modern society, but it results in a failure to create any sense of a society. Hirsch may deliberately be presented as an outsider whom society will not accept - but the effect is lost by showing nothing to connect the insiders. We move, not through an interrelated society in *Nostromo* but from isolated group to group.

The question, then, is whether there can be in any sense an adequate public drama without seeing characters in their relationships with each other. Haven't the simplicities of archetypal and epic transferability, the representative characters of fable and parable, and the personal theme of isolation, severely restricted the possibilities of *Nostromo* as a political novel? Nostromo, as Conrad pointed out in a letter to Ernest Bendz, was never intended as the hero of the novel:

> Silver is the pivot of the moral and material events affecting the lives of everybody in the tale. That this was my deliberate purpose there can be no doubt. I struck the first note of my intention in the unusual form which I gave to the title of the First Part, by calling it, 'The Silver of the Mine' and by telling the story of the enchanted treasure on Azuera, which, strictly speaking, has nothing to do with the rest of the novel. The word 'silver' occurs at the beginning of the story proper, and I took care to introduce it in the very last paragraph, which would, perhaps have been better without the phrase which contains that keyword. (Jean-Aubry 11;296)

The phrase at the end was certainly making the point - the horizon 'overhung by a big white cloud, shining like a mass of solid silver' (III. 13; 566). But this seems no worse than many other occasions when Conrad has taken care to introduce it. At the end of part I, Nostromo is seen on a silver grey horse, wearing

> a grey sombrero with a silver cord and tassels. The bright colours of a Mexican serape twisted on the cantle, the enormous silver buttons on the embroidered leather jacket, the row of tiny silver buttons down the seam of his trousers, the snowy linen, a silk sash with embroidered ends, the silver plates on headstall

and saddle, proclaimed the unapproachable style of the famous Capataz de Cargadores. (I.8; 125)

The purpose of the silver imagery here is obvious enough. It is making Nostromo less a persuasive, realistic character than some figure out of *The Faerie Queene*. But the quasi-allegoric manner fits unhappily with the political-naturalist aspects of the novel, and suggests again the illustrative, fable-nature of the design. And the over-insistence on the silver becomes damaging - so obviously 'making a point'. Ultimately the symbolism undercuts those qualities that the action or characterization or theme might have possessed. Decoud's suicide, for instance:

A victim of the disillusioned weariness which is the retribution meted out to intellectual audacity, the brilliant Don Martin Decoud, weighted by the bars of San Tome silver, disappeared without a trace, swallowed up in the immense indifference of things. His sleepless, crouching figure was gone from the side of the San Tome silver. (III.10; 501)

'Weighted by the bars of the San Tome silver' is so determinedly extending the silver metaphorically; but into what it is extended is not clear. In what way was Decoud 'weighted' by the silver, except in the simple fact of using it as a weight to drown himself? Did the silver in any way corrupt him - by avarice or envy; was he corrupted by the capitalist mine; or nationalist plans to acquire the mine? There is no reason for the symbol here; either intellectual scepticism (so making him in seeing the absurdity of living choose not to live) or love (involving him in the political struggle because of Antonia) destroyed Decoud; not the silver. The symbol is making an unacceptable point - because the symbol, as Conrad said in that letter, had to be there as 'affecting the lives of everybody in the tale.' The redundancy of the symbolic reference in the Decoud episode is not an isolated instance:

Dr. Monygham had grown older, with his head steel-grey and the unchanged expression of his face, living on the inexhaustible treasure of his devotion drawn upon in the secret of his heart like a store of unlawful wealth. (III.11. 504)

But the comparison with Nostromo, with whom that paragraph opens, is meaningless. Fidelity and loyalty to Mrs. Gould are here compared implicitly to Nostromo's devotion to his stolen silver; it's an interesting thought, but acts against everything else we are told about Monygham and Mrs. Gould in the novel. A couple of pages later we are told that the doctor's self-respect has returned. If so, how can his devotion be to something like 'unlawful' wealth? This even prevents a contrast with Nostromo - of lawful wealth bringing self-respect, stolen wealth bringing despair. But there is no contrast; both Nostromo's and Monygham's wealth is unlawful. The confusion seems to arise from Conrad's referring to the mine, silver and stolen treasure at every possible opportunity, to relate everyone to the silver, anyhow.

But more than this, the very nature of the silver image would seem such as to be unable to support any complexity of attitude or meaning. Silver is the real hero, says Eloise Knapp Hay, 'because what the silver stands for - material interests - have become the rationale of modern economics and politics. Conrad asks how it happened and what will happen next' (162). The conception of something 'standing for' something, in the simple way that silver is said to stand for material interests, would argue not only a predetermined thesis but a necessarily simple and even crude analysis. And with something like 'the rationale of modern economics and politics', something of that complexity, a blanket symbol like silver could never be adequate.

By choosing a silver mine and by using the silver of the mine as his central image, Conrad has obscured and confused the issue of imperialist capitalism. By established conventional exchange value, silver has become thought of as having an inherent value. A consequence of this in *Nostromo* is the blurring of the issue of capitalism, and imperialism and exploitation - the social-political economic aspects - into the quite irrelevant theme of avarice or miserliness. But for Conrad, the avarice-miserliness theme is important, and it is present from the very beginning of the novel with the story of the gringos. The same thing occurs in *Our Mutual Friend* where at times Dickens seems to be dealing with exploiting employers, crooked racketeers, and the stock exchange, but where the action revolves around Boffin's becoming a miser. To bring miserliness in is to bring in a separate figure of moral

caricature, very distant from the issue of the exploitive system of human relations that is capitalism. Of course avarice is one motivation of Holroyd, and so might relate him to Nostromo and Sotillo; but the political point about Holroyd is less his avarice than his power as an investor and his consequent power over the people of Costaguana through the economic system of the mine. The treasure of the gringos is comparable to Nostromo's treasure. But the silver that corrupts Nostromo isn't the silver that causes the revolutions and that the people mine. The image is making factitious associations. Nostromo may ultimately be greedy, but individual greed is nothing like the inhumane exploitation that the greed of a capitalist who puts his treasure out to generate more treasure creates. Nostromo does not set up a huge system of labour compounds, depressed wages, inhumane controls on other people in order to get rich. The confusion over the silver is associated with the confusion over 'material interest'. It is not clear what Conrad means - if anything very specific - by the phrase. It is possible that he meant something as simple as Eloise Knapp Hay suggests, something that could be symbolized by the silver; certainly the phrase is associated with economics, business, etc. But the point is less that the phrase can represent anything meaningful about business, capitalism, politics, than that Conrad's characters are not sure what material interest means. Whose interest, what sort of materialism, are left undefined. 'Material interest' is a deliberate mystification. It is a formula that finally becomes deliberately meaningless - a surrender to ignorance, the desire at least to give a name to what is not understood. It becomes a statement of helplessness before inevitable unknown forces, to those who are unable or refuse to see the truth about the situation. To Conrad there isn't any truth anyway. It is all hopeless, all meaningless. 'Material interest' is the despairing catch-cry of those who accept the capitalist status quo - because to have to think about it all and to do anything about it is too terrible.

An immense desolation, the dread of her own continued life, descended upon the first lady of Sulaco. With a prophetic vision she saw herself surviving alone the degradation of her young ideal life, of love, of work - all alone in the Treasure House of the World. The profound, blind, suffering expression of a

painful dream settled on her face with its closed eyes. In the indistinct voice of an unlucky sleeper, lying passive in the grip of a merciless nightmare, she stammered out aimlessly the words - 'Material interest.' (111.11;522)

The despair in continuing life is very similar to that other high bourgeois's, Decoud's. And in the similarity there is the suggestion not of any revelation or understanding, but rather of 'aimlessly' mouthing the uncomprehended phrase. She is 'lying passive'. It is one of the many images of defeat before the political or social facts. It is a discovery only in the very limited sense of Mrs. Gould's realizing something is wrong - and everyone realises that. Exactly what is wrong she does not discover, does not want to discover - the phrase 'material interest' in all its pessimistic and dissociative emptiness is ideal.

Arnold Kettle insists on a different interpretation. 'This is the climax of Mrs. Gould's moral discovery in the novel, a discovery from which Conrad never really dissociates himself.' For Kettle

objectively it is clear that 'material interest' stands for imperialism. It is the whole process and consequence of imperialist exploitation, so richly and concretely and humanely illustrated throughout the length of the book, that Mrs. Gould is brought against .... It is the failure to recognise in its full theoretical and moral significance the process of imperialism that leads to the element of mistiness in *Nostromo.* (11.80)

It may be objectively clear to Kettle that 'material interest' stands for imperialism. But that is to see things more clearly than Conrad does; or more clearly than Conrad wants to see things. He does not want Marxist revelations; he prefers cosmic nihilism to that. Kettle implies that Conrad has given the evidence and failed only to draw his conclusions about imperialism or capitalism. But that sort of evidence is never given. *Nostromo* isn't a realistic novel, it doesn't consist of rich documentation from which a conclusion can be drawn; it illustrates a conclusion that believes in the transcendence of mere social detail, of the mere circumstances of social living; its cosmic nihilism has no need to be bothered with mere suffering; life is suffering.

This is the belief of the European bourgeois intellectual, who manages to live without suffering. People in the mines never get to be intellectuals to express any different belief. Conrad is not interested in the sort of evidence that would suggest that the world could be changed, that it isn't the cosmos but capitalism that is wrong. It is just this capitalist exploitation that is not shown, that is omitted from the picture. If it were richly and concretely shown the book would be a considerably fuller political novel, and if it were there, then it might be possible to read 'imperialist capitalism' for 'material interest'. Instead, though, we have an omnipresent pessimism, the total scepticism that allows Conrad not to worry about the details, and that vagueness of 'material interest' suits the vagueness of the whole analysis. That the phrase 'material interest' is singular, might suggest that there is only one interest represented (Kettle's imperialism, perhaps). However the phrase is continually used in the plural elsewhere in the novel, suggesting a variety of human interests, though all material, involved in the situation. In the first edition of the novel (London, 1904) Mrs. Gould's despair is' slightly differently worded, and the interest becomes interests:
In the indistinct voice of an unlucky sleeper, lying passive in the toils of a merciless nightmare, she stammered out aimlessly the words 'Material interests.' (1904 edition, p. 443)

If capitalism and imperialism were being seriously examined we might expect something of the treatment they get in *Heart of Darkness.* But there is nothing in *Nostromo* to compare with the specific observation of capitalism at work in the third world that we find there:

Another mine on the cliff went off, followed by a slight shudder of the soil under my feet. The work was going on. The work!
And this was the place where some of the helpers had withdrawn to die.
They were dying slowly - it was very clear. They were not enemies, they were not criminals, they were nothing earthly now - nothing but black shadows of disease and starvation, lying confusedly in the greenish gloom. Brought from all the recesses of the coast in all the legality of time contracts, lost in

uncongenial surroundings, fed on unfamiliar food, they sickened, became inefficient, and were then allowed to craw away and rest. These moribund shapes were free as air and nearly as thin. (1;17)

Costaguana, it is possible, is different from this. But we are shown nothing - either good or evil - of this aspect of imperialist capitalism. And the implication is that we don't need to be shown in any detail, because in the political revolutions we see in *Nostromo,* economic and social conditions play no determining part. The specific details of any revolutionary action, the causes of any political movement are significantly absent. The silver, as Conrad pointed out, was there as 'affecting the lives of everybody in the tale'. Very clearly it affects Charles Gould's marriage, and very clearly it affects Nostromo. Nostromo is corrupted - though he was hardly incorruptible but, with no principle other than being a star, getting famous, well open to corruption. But his corruption is different from Gould's.

Any great wealth would have corrupted Nostromo, and it is a corruption due to the Biblical 'love of money is the root of all evil' (the gringo message), not to any political activity. And any obsessive occupation would have corrupted Gould to the extent of separating him from his wife, and this is a corruption due to his personality rather than to his political involvement. There is no necessary relationship between the two corruptions - merely the coincidental one that the great wealth is the product of the obsessive occupation. In that any obsessive occupation could have corrupted, dehumanised, Gould, the association of that corruption with the mine is an accidental association; his 'infidelity' to his wife is no different from Casaubon' s drawing apart from Dorothea, in *Middlemarch* - it is simply a man with a central idea to his life withdrawing from human contacts. And that sort of obsessive involvement is not the prerogative of capitalism.

Yet it is suggested by association that the mine has some inherent quality that corrupts Gould. It might be mysterious - the gringo legend - or mundane.

The mine had corrupted his judgment by making him sick of bribing and intriguing merely to have his work left alone from day to day. (III.4; 364-5)

The suggestion is that his exhaustion with dealing with the political affairs surrounding the mine, external to the mine, have led to his withdrawing from the world and from his wife. The mine itself, the system of relationships and economics within it, are not susceptible to political interpretation. The mine is 'his work' - something value free, and a moral positive in itself (work) - and Conrad seems to accept Gould's view of 'his work' here. The extent of Conrad's willingness to see the 'work' in political terms, is that 'work' involves doing deals with others who won't work. But work itself he does not see as open to political analysis of its structures, of its nature.

As a personal tragedy the collapse of the Gould's marriage is convincing; but if by the destruction of the marriage and human relationships any criticism is intended to the mine, it is a criticism that totally ignores the details of that mine's capitalist nature; unless we see the nature of the exploitative, alienated relationships Gould is involved in and has institutionalised at the mine, so that we can see how these are carried into his personal life, the charge that the mine has destroyed his marriage is without any substance. It becomes a deflection of concern from the essential to the peripheral and irrelevant - the 'personal' or 'emotional' detached from the pervasive dominant system of relationships Gould is involved in. Once again the connexion between the representative characters and the socio-economic world they live in is not explored. And what might at first have seemed to be a criticism of capitalism, is left as a wholly 'personal' event, confused by the blanket imagery with the political theme but never analytically related to it.

The essence of capitalism is in its system of human social and economic relationships. To say merely that is to indicate the inadequacy of Conrad's conception in *Nostromo.* Yet the gestures towards an analysis of capitalism are taken seriously, perhaps because of the Holroyd parts. Holroyd is suggestively well done. But the success in pointing to the shift in foreign capital corning into Costaguana - the U.S.A. now entering a previously U.K. dominated field - and his association of capital with a 'pure form of Christianity', does not mean that Conrad had in any major way understood or investigated capitalism. This, after all, is only one aspect of the financier's motives and confusions; but the analysis

never extends to the workings of and the social consequences of the capitalist industry. It is in the people's social and economic relationship with each other, with other classes, and with the mine, that the essence of capitalism resides and that reason for political activity might be found. Holroyd's motives are not the results, the consequences of a capitalist mode of production. But the little that we are told about the mine is significantly not clear enough for us to make any decision about it. The mine workers gain a degree of security, but they exist under a sort of military rule -protected by an armed body of serenos, and wearing uniforms. We are not told in what ways this organisation affected political feeling - whether the dehumanised, paramilitary social organisation of the workers led to revolution, or whether the mine workers were 'bought off' by comparatively higher wages than other workers and mystified into a support of the system, like the labor castes in *The Iron Heel*. Conrad resorts to a convenient ambiguity - preferring paradox, ambiguity, artistic, mystic transcendence, to presenting the specific materials for a political indictment.

Leavis (218) makes much of the parallelism in the phrase

'Has not the master of the mine any message to send to Hernandez, the master of the Campo?'
The truth of the comparison struck Charles Gould heavily.
(III.3; 360)

But what really is the point? Isn't it to suggest that both the workings of the mine and the banditry are alien, lawless, amoral, apolitical? And this conclusion would be borne out by the fact that the paramilitary capitalist mine isn't given the criticism or detailed attention that the political participants are. Gould's belief in the power of the mine as a force for stability seems to have spread through the novel in the same way as Decoud's scepticism and nihilism - the attitudes have gone beyond being positions held only by characters. There is a strong suggestion that as all the politicians are seen as unreliable, ineffective or wicked, something like the militaristic stability of the mine is a good thing. So Captain Mitchell remarks 'A great power, this, for good and evil sir. A great power' (III.10; 186). And the same attitude is found in Mrs. Gould's reflections:

There was something inherent in the necessities of successful action which carried with it the moral degradation of the idea. She saw the San Tome mountain hanging over the Campo, over the whole land, feared, hated, wealthy, more soulless than any tyrant, more pitiless and autocratic than the worst government, ready to crush innumerable lives in the expansion of its greatness. (III.11 ;521)

The implication is that the mine is worse than any tyrant or Government because it possesses a power superior to and separate from the political. Similarly the concept of the idea that is morally degraded in action carries the implication that the idea was originally apolitical, but became sullied in the practical political environment in which it had to exist, giving bribes to get on with the apolitical 'work.' And this is associable with the implied parallel of the mine and the bandit gang - a parallel that presents them as both outside the political and economic forces of the state, as both somehow transcending the political, social and economic.

But this is not so, of course. The idea of the mine, the structure of the mine, its manner of financing and its mode of operation, employment, is political. The wealth, the physical silver, has value only through social convention. The mine's capitalist structure of employment and investment, the social relationships that it imposes on the people, its position in the total economy, are basic determinants of any political feeling or action in Sulaco. And it is this that Eloise Knapp Hay fails to see when she claims that

In Gould's refusal to commit his mine to any politically responsible line, Conrad evidently means to demonstrate (and does so most credibly) the essential anarchy of capitalist societies in which politics is directed by business interests. (188-9)

But Conrad never shows us any lines that are politically responsible; the way Conrad presents it, all politicians are irresponsible; Gould is not criticized for failing to commit his mine to any of the politicians. Conrad is sympathetic to the ideology that says, politicians are corrupt, I will retain the mine myself. But of course, though Gould may think he is making a choice, with himself outside and above politics, the realities are quite different.

The mine in its organization, financing and structure is very much involved in the political scene, and dependent on and supporting a specific political ideology. The mine is already committed to a political line. Politics are the expression of business interests. Conrad however wants us to believe other than that. He wants us at one level to believe all politicians are corrupt and hopeless, and the good individual transcends them, like simple honest Gulliver towering above the political Lilliputians. At the same time he reaches that conclusion because he has an ideal conception of 'politics' by which 'politics as they are' is judged. It is only because he has residual illusions that he is critical of the political arena - illusions that there are men of independent, abstract morality, whose views are not determined by their economic interest.

Despising politicians, and yet holding an idealised vision of the political, Conrad has only one solution - an advocacy of political withdrawal, expressed in a stream of novels dealing with the political world. Still haunted by the ideal, still fascinated by politics, Conrad continually writes about politics in order to reject them. This doesn't get him very far in understanding what politics are; he doesn't want to be demystified, because in one sense he already knows. And so what we are given in *Nostromo* is less any modern analysis of politics and society than a fable whose moral is to suggest a disgusted withdrawal from political and social life. The only approach to fulfillment in the novel is that offered to Monygham by Mrs. Gould - and she is an 'outsider' from society, cut off from the political and social events (though in that very stance, of course, acting as an influential conservative force: not thinking, not really wanting to know about it, just being sad and withdrawn and hence going along with things as they are, not opposing them or deflecting them). The gringo legend clearly established the pervasive attitude of the corruption of wealth, but of course says nothing about the forces involved in capitalism or nationalism or imperialism. Simplified characters, because of their simplicity, can be treated as instruments of the attitude of disgust. Why, in a supposedly political novel, is there the episode of Sotillo looking for silver? How does this usefully illuminate a political novel of the twentieth-century?

Sotillo blind and deaf to everything, stuck on board his steamer

watching the dragging for silver, which he believed to be sunk at the bottom of the harbour. They say that for the last three days he was out of his mind, raving and foaming with disappointment at getting nothing, flying about the deck, and yelling curses at the boats with the drags, ordering them in, and then suddenly stamping his foot and crying out, 'And yet it is there! I see it! I see it' (III.10; 484)

Political complexity, political action, political motives are reduced to the caricature of the miser figure. But if Conrad had dealt with more complex characters, with something other than fable figures, he could not have argued his case. His attitude towards politics is arguable only in the simplified characters and the simplicity of the events and setting he has used.

Christopher Caudwell captured the nature of Conrad's dilemma in *Romance and Realism*:

Conrad is alien to bourgeoisdom as materially manifested, but he is native to no other culture. As a result, in rejecting its more material manifestations - ethics, utilitarianism, and so forth - he is left with the upper parts of its ideology, its notions of honour, courage, and bourgeois chivalry. These are noble enough in their way, but they are limited tools for tackling the complexities and richness of human society. Hence Conrad as he develops becomes very tortuous and analytical and yet, in the last remove, very simple and unsubtle. His characters, as they grow more and more self-determined, become more and more unreal. His world, as it is closed to criticism and the author, strangely loses its colour and romance. The world, as 'a moral end in itself, becomes dematerialised.

We see this in *Nostromo,* the work Conrad valued most highly. The work an author values most highly is rarely his most artistically successful, but is always the most revealing of the author's aim and technique. In *Nostromo* Conrad attempts to create a complete civilisation, a whole town, based economically on the mines, which is self-determined and exists for itself. Yet such a world turns out to be the least colourful and least romantic of all Conrad's worlds. It marks the climax of Conrad's colourlessness. It is just another case of the phenomenon seen

in James, Tennyson, Tolstoi, Swinburne, and Arnold: the deterioration of the bourgeois revolutionary. This is a microcosm of the deterioration of bourgeois culture. In revolting against that culture and its values, the bourgeois strips himself of all values, because he remains still based on its foundations, whose connexion with the superstructure he has not seen.

And so there is that great emptiness at the heart of *Nostromo* remarked upon by commentator after commentator.

In *Nostromo* Conrad allows for no political motivation, for no belief in anything; unless it is a belief based on crudely formed attitudes, a nurturing on bad literature in a Parisian garret, or on empty idealism, like Avellanos. For Conrad there couldn't be good political literature or valid, effective idealism. As for the other characters, Decoud's motive is love, not politics; Nostromo's personal fame; Gould's, justifying himself to his father, a desire of supra-political stability. Conrad presents their motives as unpolitical or depoliticized - which of course is understandable in a cast of aliens. They might well not understand or be concerned in the political pressures, since they are all aliens or Europhiles. But Conrad does not just leave it at that; the nationalist movements are dismissed as ridiculous or comic operatic or bestially cruel. He can see no other attitudes than those - and avarice - in political action. For him there is no reason for one rather than for another political movement.

Whatever *Nostromo* is, it is not, as Arnold Kettle claimed, a 'political novel in the widest sense, the sense in which Aristotle and Marx used the word politics' (II.72). Conrad in *Nostromo* seems not to be interested in any analysis of political motive or consequence or action. Any sort of socio-economic analysis and motive is absent; instead there is the moral fable, dealing with the corruptibility of man; political action is treated as just one of the many ways to corruption. Conrad expressed his attitude to politics in an essay on Anatole France, written just after *Nostromo* was completed: 'Political institutions, whether contrived by the wisdom of the few or the ignorance of the many, are incapable of securing the happiness of mankind' (33). It is an attitude that *Nostromo* illustrates rather than examines.

Alan Sillitoe's Political Novels

Alan Sillitoe's first novel, *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (1958) upset a lot of people. It provoked both tremendous enthusiasm and tremendous resistance, going through numerous reprints in the next decade yet having been rejected by a score of publishers before it was finally accepted. It was later used as the basis of a tremendously successful film, but again not before some of the major production companies had turned it down. One Midlands proletarian writer of the 1940s read the novel and was shocked by its portrayal of the working class: he advised a major American production company against their buying rights. The movie actor Dirk Bogarde recalled a similar incident:

I remember once taking Rank's a book - they've got to forgive me for this, because it happened - and it was a slender book, and I said; 'I think I'd like to make a film of it.' They said they'd read it. I was summoned to this appalling little flat we used to have at Pinewood which was called the executive suite: it had pine panelling and a big baize table. We started off with smoked salmon. The book was never mentioned till the coffee came in. Then we had cigars and finally they said: 'Would you like to tell us how we can make a movie about a woman of 40 inducing a miscarriage in a hot bath?' I said: 'No, I don't really know how you can make that - forget it.' The book was called *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning.* (304) .

The establishment and the organized left reacted as one against what seemed to them sordid in the novel - the protagonist Arthur Seaton stumbling through a succession of drunken evenings, getting into various fights, and sleeping with two married sisters, one of whom attempts the bath tub abortion. (Though for what it's worth she is said to be 29-30 in the novel, not 40.) In Britain John Coleman complained that Arthur's brutish anarchism was unrealistically

taken as working class protest, providing an opportunity for liberal self indulgence. In the U.S.A. Irving Howe wrote a review entitled 'The Worker as a Young Tough' and compared the novel unfavourably with Walter Allen's *Threescore and Ten* (originally published in Britain as *All in a Lifetime*):

a sweet-tempered retrospect of the life of Billy Ashted, an English worker who at the turn of the century had educated himself to socialist convictions, a measure of intellectuality and, most impressive of all, an enviable degree of civilized humaneness. Surely the socialist movement, for all its failures, has reason to feel that in nurturing such figures within the European working class it made a genuine contribution to humanity. (27-8)

It is just such 'civilizing' into bourgeois left-liberalism that Sillitoe's Arthur Seaton rejects. Howe argues that 'Sillitoe's mindless young hero is reaping the rewards of Billy's decades of street-speaking and door-to-door canvassing' - and Howe means 'rewards' unironically. Howe sees Billy Ashted's participation in democratic parliamentary politics as the way for change, and Arthur Seaton's complete indifference to this as failure:

‘but for all Arthur's energy, his life is sadly limited in scope and value. It is a life bound by ritualistic practice and unexamined assumption, for in the absence of genuine consciousness, his freedom comes to little more than a repetition of familiar acts with increasing violence ... Yet Mr. Sillitoe makes a particular point of 'accepting' Arthur; indeed, he strongly implies that there is a special sort of realistic virtue in 'accepting' him as he is, and not expecting him to become anything very different.. .. Sillitoe's attitude toward Arthur is notably free from moral nagging or political exhortation; but it may be that in its hard-headed and undeluded way it is not quite free from sentimentality, the kind of sentimentality which, passing as cultural relativism or a respect for variant mores, one sometimes finds among anthropologists who celebrate the odd behaviour of 'their' tribes. It is an attitude which tempts the observer - in this case, the writer - to abandon a little too

easily his own standards, his own judgements.' (27-8)

Revealingly, Howe cannot believe that Sillitoe could genuinely share Arthur's judgements. He assumes that Sillitoe has abandoned his own more 'civilized' values - for since Sillitoe is a writer, he must have 'civilized' values. That Sillitoe might reject that class whose values are put forward as those of 'civilization', Howe never considers, nor can he conceive that Arthur's behaviour is anything other than 'mindless': the working class figure who learns to think must surely discover the rational ideology of social democracy in Howe's world picture. Anything else is mindless. When Howe reviewed *Key to the Door* the notice was titled 'In Fear of Thinking'. Praising Sillitoe's achievements, he wrote:

> Only one gift seems lacking, the gift of mind; and that I take to be mainly the result of Sillitoe's own willfulness. For the trouble is not that he can't think, but that he seems to look upon thinking with distrust, as if it were an enemy of the creative impulse .... In *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* this notion leads to an indulgent 'acceptance' of the sporadic violence and constricted consciousness of the young proletarian hero, Arthur Seaton. (25-6)

Because his material was urban working class life, Sillitoe's novel invited certain critical preconceptions. It was subsumed into a socialist realist, proletarian fiction tradition. This identification has been made both by academic critics and by the left wing commentators, to whose ranks so many of the earlier proletarian novelists had belonged. To Howe, Sillitoe's 'refusal to think' can only be a literary self-indulgence, affecting an identity with his mindless protagonist's 'constricted consciousness'. The left offered two approaches: one of angry rejection, one of absorption. The rejection was very similar to Howe's rejection - seeing Sillitoe's stance as a failure of consciousness and of aesthetic. David Craig in his article 'The British Working Class Novel Today' claims that Gunther Klotz's 'argument that Arthur Seaton is not typical in that he is no leader of his class does point to an essential weakness of the novel: the hero is too much of an anarchistic lone-wolf and egoist, and seems almost valued by the author on that account' (37n). But

the very idea of a 'leader of his class' is questioned by Nigel Gray, who sees Sillitoe as 'too much taken with the working-class hero cult' (113) and argues that what he was doing 'in bowing to the Western hero cult, was adopting a middle-class standard' (220). While Dmitri Shestakov absorbs the novel into the conventional, positive socialist tract, stressing the ' representative' quality of Arthur in his confrontations with authority figures:

‘Indeed, with every new episode in his ordinary life Arthur Seaton feels drawn ever more deeply into a desperate battle for freedom, for the right not to depend on the income-tax man, the army officer, the trade union boss, the Parliamentary windbags, for the right to be a man.
‘But Sillitoe knows better than 'angry young' Seaton how difficult it is to earn this right and that you must not wait for it by going off secretly - as Arthur does - to fish or to visit the woman he loves. Life, the factory, people call one back, however much Seaton assures himself that there is 'nothing for it but money to drag you back there every Monday morning.' (176)

Saturday Night and Sunday Morning is in the slice-of-life tradition of proletarian fiction. There is no overall plot or fable to give the novel a 'shape'; it is sufficiently in the tradition to suspect such shapes as being external, misleading, distorting the naturalistic observation through bourgeois aesthetic mystifications. The lack of overall conscious formal qualities is something that has continued to characterise Sillitoe' s novels. In an interview with Brendan Hennessy he remarked 'there is no particular strict form for a novel - it can be as rough, with as many ragged edges as it likes. A novel is like a great piece of bloody meat. As long as it's bleeding and tasty - that's all right.' (111)

Saturday Night and Sunday Morning is a string of episodes showing Arthur working in a Nottingham bicycle factory, getting drunk, having an affair with the wife of a workmate, another affair with her sister, being beaten up by the sister's soldier husband and his mate, and finally preparing to settle down with a young girl who wants marriage. These episodes have some loose continuity of narrative. But there are others which express Arthur's nature but that are unrelated to the sexual adventures that supply the story-line

and suspense (will Brenda's abortion succeed, will her husband find out about Arthur, will the swaddies catch him?) - episodes that have the self-containment of short stories. Sillitoe told Brendan Hennessy

‘Some of my novels do tend to have the appearance of a string of short stories in a way. When I was writing *Saturday Night* I put about 12 short stories into it, ploughed them into the text, which is why it had the appearance of a picaresque novel.’ (111)

These episodes frequently express in brief the novel's central attitudes. One such describes how, drinking with his brother one night, Arthur is walking along a street when someone throws a beer mug through an undertaker's window.

Arthur was stirred by the sound of breaking glass: it synthesized all the anarchism within him, was the most perfect and suitable noise to accompany the end of the world and himself. He ran towards the disturbance, each strike of his boots on the pavement sending an echo through the empty circle of buildings, rebounding from each deserted corner.
“Come on,” he called to Fred.
Several people already stood near the undertaker's window, as if they had sprung out of the ground, and by the doorway a woman held the bewildered culprit by his wrist. Arthur peered closer and saw that another woman, younger and wearing an Army uniform - the colour of which immediately prejudiced him - had taken command. and had sent someone to fetch the police. (7;94)

The incident epitomizes Arthur's stance, his excitement at the sound of something breaking, of some destruction, his attempt to encourage the 'culprit' to run off before the police came. But the culprit is too drunk, too simple, too brow-beaten, too all-in-all defeated, to be able to resist the authority of the woman in khaki. Both are lost, sad people, the 'culprit' wanting a black vase for his mother's grave:

an odd, lonely person who gave off the air of belonging nowhere at all, which caused Arthur to think him half-witted.

The uniformed woman looked as though she had never had a home and belonged nowhere, but she had aligned herself with order and law, and sympathy was against her.' (7; 94-5)

But the man fails to run off and the police come and collect him.

What the novel does is identify the various forces of law and order, and identify too the characters who are awed into submission by or collusion with law and order and end up espousing it against their own best interests, to the destruction of their own humanity - like the woman in the khaki uniform, or like Jack, whose wife Brenda is having an affair with Arthur. Jack's advice to Arthur is 'Why don't you get wise, Arthur? Why don't you meet a nice girl and settle down? It'll do you the world of good' (12;146). And what is distressing to many of the old left is that they find themselves lumped in with the repressive forces of law and order, forces hostile to the proletarian individualism of Arthur. Arthur stands in single anarchic opposition to all authority structures:

They were angling for another war now, with the Russians this time. But they did go as far as to promise that it would be a short one, a few big flashes and it would be all over. What a lark! We'd be fighting side by side with the Germans that had been bombing us in the last war. What did they take us for? Bloody fools, but one of these days they'd be wrong. They think they've settled our hashes with their insurance cards and television sets, but I'll be one of them to turn round on 'em and let them see how wrong they are. When I'm on my fifteen-days' training and I lay on my guts behind a sand-bag shooting at a target board I know whose faces I've got in my sights every time the new rifle cracks off. Yes. The bastards that put the gun into my hands. I make up a quick picture of their stupid four-eyed faces that blink as they read big books and papers on how to get blokes into khaki and fight battles in a war that they'll never be in- and then I let fly at them. Crack-crack-crack-crack-crack-crack. Other faces as well: the snot-gobbling gett that teks my income tax, the swivel-eyed swine that collects our rent, the bigheaded bastard that gets my goat when he asks me to go to union meetings or sign a paper against what's happening in Kenya. As if I care. (9;114-5)

Politicians, unionists, police, the military - Arthur identifies and opposes all the forces trying to limit, repress, control, organise. All but one; there is one major exception in Arthur's anti-authoritarianism, as Nigel Gray points out. 'Arthur is against all authority except the authority of men over women.' (129)

The situation is never considered from the position of the woman. Women are second-class citizens. Fools who get their hair caught in machines. Bloody shrews who object to man enjoying his glass of malt. (118)

And Gray goes on to redefine Arthur's anarchism as displaced authoritarianism:

The authoritarian personality is one which will submit resentfully to authority and redirect his aggression. Arthur's authoritarianism is most obvious in his relationships with women. He detests the army where he finds himself on the bottom of the heap. (123)

There is no doubt about Arthur's male chauvinism and his 'Victorian' attitudes to women. These were, no doubt still are, endemic to British society, no matter what class. And for someone on the receiving end of an authoritarian system, the pressure to find someone else to lord it over is considerable. That is the nature of authoritarian systems, of hierarchies - to conscript everyone into perpetuating that structure of relationships. Authoritarianism and sexism are part of the establishment, exploitative culture. But it does not necessarily follow that because Arthur is authoritarian and sexist in his attitudes towards women, his anarchic resistance to the authoritarianism and class society pressures he suffers is invalid. His intuitive, spontaneous hostility to authority is something to be extended, so that sexism can be seen as yet another authority system to be rejected: it is not something to be discredited and defused because of some static, conservative, quasi-Freudian theory of displacement. In the 1950s there was no structure of analysis and no vocabulary current with which to identify and place sexism. The women's movement developed in the 1960s and its impact on Sillitoe's fiction can be seen in *The Flame of Life* (1974). It is important

to identify Arthur's sexism: but it would be unhistorical and unproductive to disqualify Arthur's forceful anti-authoritarianism· because he holds those sexist attitudes.

The military are the recurrent specific example of alien authority running through *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning,* standing in for all other authorities: the woman in khaki seizing the drunk, the swaddies out to beat-up Arthur for his affair with Winnie, the 15 days of territorial army camp imposing on his time and. freedom, and the officer in authority there. The objections to the military are not, as some critics have claimed, pacifist ones, but objections to authorities, and to the maintenance of authorities by force. They arise from the same spirit as Lawrence's objection to compulsory medical examination for conscription in World War I in *Kangaroo*:

Once a rebel, always a rebel. You can't help being one. You can't deny that. And it's best to be a rebel so as to show 'em it don't pay to try to do you down. Factories and labour exchanges and insurance offices keep us alive and kicking - so they say - but they're booby traps and will suck you under like sinking sands if you aren't careful. Factories sweat you to death, labour exchanges talk you to death, insurance and income tax offices milk money from your wage packets and rob you to death. And if you're still left with a tiny bit of life in your guts after all this boggering about, the Army calls you up and you get shot to death. And if you're clever enough to stay out of the Army you get bombed to death. Ay, by God, it's a hard life if you don't weaken, if you don't stop that bastard government from grinding your face in the muck, though there ain't much you can do about it unless you start making dynamite to blow their four-eyed clocks to bits. They shout at you from soapboxes: 'Vote for me, and this and that,' but it amounts to the same in the end whatever you vote for because it means a government that puts stamps all over your phizzog until you can't see a hand before you, and what's more makes you buy 'em so's they can keep on doing it. They've got you by the guts, by backbone and skull, until they think you'll come whenever they whistle.
But listen, this lathe is my everlasting pal because it gets me thinking, and that's their big mistake because I know I'm not the only one. One day they'll bark and we won't run into a pen

like sheep. One day they'll flash their lamps and clap their hands and say: 'Come on, lads. Line-up and get your money. We won't let you starve.' But maybe some of us will want to starve, and that'll be where the trouble'll start. Perhaps some'll want to play football, or go fishing up Grantham Cut. That big fat-bellied union ponce'll ask not to muck things up. Sir Harold Blabbertab'll promise us a bigger bonus when things get put right. Chief Inspector Popcorn will say; 'Let's have no trouble, no hanging around the gates there.' Blokes with suits and bowler hats will say: 'These chaps have got their television sets, enough to live on, council houses, beer, and pools, some have even got cars. We've made them happy. What's wrong? Is that a machine gun I hear starting up or a car backfiring?'
Der -der-der -der -der -der -der -der -der -der -der- der- der. I hope I'm not here to see it, but I know I will be. I'm a bloody billy-goat trying to screw the world, and no wonder I am, because it's trying to do the same to me. (15;16-7)

Sillitoe' s significance as a political novelist lies in his rejection of party politics, in his identifying the authorities of right and left - seeing them as both to be rejected. Sillitoe' s only occasional association with the organized left - writing for the English Communist Party daily newspaper *The Daily Worker* for instance – have often obscured his position. Interviewed in 1969 by Igor Hajek he said,

‘If they ask me what I am, a Communist or Socialist, etc., I can only answer that I'm on the Left, beyond that I can't say much ... A writer never stands still. When you are young, everything is simple, but I am not young any more, I'm 40 and that means that I am leaving a lot of simplicities behind. Basic beliefs stay, but things now look more complex.’ (123)

And the authorities rejected by Sillitoe are not only party-political; any sort of imposition in the name of authority is rejected - whether it is political, military, familial or sexual. Frank Dawley in Sillitoe's later trilogy has to fight for freedom not only by leaving his job and his country, but also his wife and the various women encountered along the way. The positive stance of Sillitoe's fiction is the

individual's aim for his freedom, for free expression, to be an individual, not just a number or statistic to be manipulated. 'Both Marxists and advertisers have this much in common' he wrote in 'Both Sides of the Street' in the *Times Literary Supplement*; 'to them the ordinary people are "the masses" and not individuals' (435). The position he adopted is close to that of the anarchist permanent protest - and this of course was not expected by most of the commentators on his work. Since he wrote sympathetically about the working class, it was assumed he took an organized left position automatically. In his article in *TLS* he attempted a definition of the writer of the right and of the left.

For the purposes of this argument I will call the writer who is content with the society he lives in a man of the Right, and a writer who is by nature against society I will call a man of the Left. By this I don't mean to say that one sort of writer is better or worse than another, but these differing sides must be considered when deciding the attitudes of writing to this age of mass communications. In writing a man of the Left is not a member of the opposition, which implies similarity in basic ideas and the possibility of becoming allies, but a revolutionary, for the Left and Right of literature that I have in mind can never meet for compromise. (435)

Identifying the enemies of freedom in the advertisers, Marxists, unionists, politicians, employers and military, Sillitoe was at the same time anxious to preserve the proletarian origins of his anarchism. Anarchism in the 60s and 70s, perhaps even more than Marxism in the 30s, was an easy, theoretical, clean-handed position for the intellectual to adopt. But Sillitoe's awareness of the dangers of becoming absorbed into. the intellectual bourgeoisie resulted in a strong assertion of his role as a proletarian writer.

These working class people who are not afraid to take a hard cover book in their hands suffer from certain disadvantages compared to the middle-class reader. The latter, no matter what values he lives by, can take out a book and see in it either a mirror of himself, or someone he knows; he is fully represented in contemporary writing, while the man who works at the lathe

is not. Working men and women who read do not have the privilege of seeing themselves honestly and realistically portrayed in novels.' (435)

It is a position that Sillitoe adhered to. In his interview with Brendan Hennessey he reaffirmed his commitment:

What I do in my work is write about people who are not written about in novels. I'd not read in novels about people who are treated as people and not caricatures. There are one or two, like *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists,* one or two things in the thirties perhaps. But it wasn't a seam that was done at all. If people read a book and they see in it situations in which they are actually taking part in everyday life - as a matter of form - it was the way they were born - then it gives them some way of seeing themselves through the eyes of society. (108)

This observation of Sillitoe's was not new, but it is one that has been largely ignored. William Empson discussed the issue in *Some Versions of Pastoral* (1935) where he argued that much proletarian literature either showed the (sensitive) man trying to escape from his environment, or presented a 'Covert Pastoral' . 'To produce pure proletarian art,' Empson wrote, 'the artist must be at one with the working class; this is impossible, not for political reasons, but because the artist is never at one with any public' (15). But the writer does not have to be 'at one' with a social group to write with or for or in the context of its world picture; if a writer *is* never at one with any public, then it is no more impossible in theory for him to write proletarian fiction than to write the bourgeois fiction that has been the norm. There have been true representatives of the working class before *Sillitoe;* and Nigel Gray has situated Sillitoe in a post-war group of writers about the English working class in his study *The Silent Majority.* Though since the class origin of most English writers has been middle class - Raymond Williams' chapter on 'The Social History of English Writers' in *The Long Revolution* offers useful documentation of that - when working people have been portrayed in fiction they have usually been presented as stereotyped stock characters, rather than as *individuals* with individuals' feelings and perceptions:

There is a gap to be filled by novelists who are capable of writing about individuals among this literary underprivileged class in a realistic way, and writers most capable of this are those who have experienced the sort of life in which these individuals are found. (435)

Sillitoe's proclaimed proletarianism inevitably encountered the notorious British repressive tolerance, the welcoming of any lively protest as engaging innovation, interesting entertainment; while society stands firms. As Walter Benjamin put it in 'The Author as Producer':

the bourgeois apparatus of production and publication is capable of assimilating, indeed of propagating, an astonishing amount of revolutionary themes without ever seriously putting into question its own continued existence or that of the class which owns it.... An appreciable part of so-called left-wing literature had no other social function than that of continually extracting new effects or sensations from this situation for the public's entertainment. (94)

When Sillitoe reiterated his position, it got boring to the reviewers: Cyril Connolly commented in the *Sunday Times* on *Key to the Door*, 'The rebel stance so taut in the *Long Distance Runner* has become a vaguely chip-on-the-shoulder near Communism.' It was all right once, but not again, dear boy. Chip-on-the-shoulder in this context referred to complaining of living in houses without baths, of streets grimed over with the smoke of factories, of working short time, of having spent years on the dole, of being uneducated in shoddy schools with classes of forty children, of council house waiting lists, of the continual threat of redundancy, unemployment of the acceptance that such conditions should ever exist. Yet Connolly's statement at least had the merit of being explicit. It showed the complete incomprehension that Sillitoe's proletarian naturalism continually came up against, and the complete incomprehension of this anti-authoritarian anarchism: 'vaguely chip-on-the-shoulder near-Communism'. For all his apparent success, Sillitoe failed in the proletarianism he proclaimed, failed in the very fact of his success. His large sales showed a ready middle-

class readership and an absorption into the educational text machine, and the savagery of his onslaught on middle-class society was ignored or absorbed. An attack on society gathers force; the society recognizes it blandly and gives it a name and nullifies it; it is all indiscriminately heaped together under some current phrase - Sillitoe was lumped in with the 'Angry Young Men' and the 'Kitchen Sink' playwrights. And the protest, named, itself becomes established and static. Sillitoe was admired but what he was saying went by without understanding. Connolly, writing of *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* referred to its 'small closed world - in this case of pub, factory, sex and violence.' Sixty-seven per cent of the British work force at that time were classed as manual workers: a 'small, closed world' of a 40-48 hour factory week. As Nigel Gray has pointed out, what distinguishes *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* is its 'wealth of detail about the nature of work and the feelings of people engaged in it' (103). But Connolly would never have known anything about that. Sillitoe's aim to redress the balance of the primarily middle-class literary world foundered on the flabbiness of leisure-class mandarinism.

'Proletarianism' is more consciously, more programmatically a part of *Key to the Door* (1961) than of *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning.* It is as if Sillitoe has attempted to provide a representative conspectus of working class life - redirecting attention from Arthur Seaton's violence and sexuality to allow the qualities of his bookish brother to be established. But Brian, the brother, is no labour club, good student, civilized proletarian rising through Fabian ranks to become an Uncle Tom. Although a broader range of behaviour than Arthur's somewhat extravagant life is shown, the intuitive anti-authoritarian anarchism remains, and is explored in a wider context; it becomes a theme in the novel, something that is brooded over and developed - in contrast with the anarchic behaviour of Arthur in *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* that is never intellectualised. Whereas Arthur's anarchism is a spontaneous reaction to his capitalist-industrial urban environment, Brian's is a conscious position reached not only through his immediate personal experiences, but through observing and thinking about society. Nina Matveyeva recorded Sillitoe' s comparison of the two novels:

'In our social system,' he continued, 'there are many people

to whom "material" things are more important than spiritual. They go all out for material success, and once they've got it they find it has a "bitter taste". In my first novel *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* I tried to show a young British worker who from the point of view of those around him had everything man might need in the material sense. But he was discontented, because he was completely without spiritual sustenance. To a considerable degree the dissatisfaction of British youth arises from this same feeling of spiritual deprivation, although, of course, there is still much material need .. ..
'In my novel *Key to the Door* the hero realizes this lack of something highly essential in life far earlier than did his elder brother, the hero of my first book. He has a more conscious attitude to the society in which he lives.' (180-2)

In part, *Key to the Door* is a consolidation and filling out of the previous Nottingham material. It can be seen as an attempt to examine the total environment which made the protagonist of *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* what he is. The stories of *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner* had already done something of this. Here, by following the families of the Seaton boys back through two generations, some historical depth is also given.

But the family chronicle is not a proletarian form. The bourgeois imitation of aristocratic family worship led to the Victorian and Edwardian family sagas. But such a worship of the accumulation of property and the acquisition of status, the hagiography of the individual line and wealth, is impossible for the realities of the working class. The economic pauperisation of industrialism prevented the financial accumulation that would allow the establishment of the 'family'; and industrial capitalism's reduction of individual dignity to a unit on the factory floor prevented the development of an emotional or spiritual overlay to the idea of 'family'. The rallying round of the family members in time of trouble, the close-knit camaraderies of working class life the sociologists all comment on is a thing of the immediate present - of those members of the family alive here and now; but it doesn't extend to a worship of ancestors, or to planting walnut trees for the future. *Key to the Door* is concerned with Arthur's brother Brian, and their father; but their paternal grandfather is not established; he

is said to be an upholsterer who was too drunk ever to teach his son his trade, which offers an explanation for Seaton, the father, being unemployed, unskilled. But that is all we are told of the grandfather. Seaton's wife's father, old Merton, however, does feature in the generational pattern of the novel. He is still alive during Arthur and Brian's childhood, so that he has a family role in the present. He represents something different, however. Whereas the unindividualised Seaton grandfather is one of the nameless, crushed industrial proletariat, Merton has an individualism, a dignity. Importantly, he doesn't live in a Nottingham slum.

When on an errand to his grandma Merton' s, the couple of grandiose miles out from the last houses of Nottingham became an expedition. Across his route lay streams and lanes and stiles, while to the left stretched a green banked railway line, rightwards an acre of allotment gardens whose shabby huts and stunted trees were often raided by roving kids from Radford ... (II.41; 59)

An important component of Brian's childhood is the escape from the city into this semi-rural environment. But the novelistic interest of this material lies in its moving out of the strictly urban proletarian material; when Sillitoe moves back into this third generation, it is into a rather different milieu.

The problem for the English proletarian anarchist or Marxist novelist is to create an engaging fiction yet avoid celebrating the culture that is being rejected, that politically, socially, ideologically is being condemned. The problem becomes more acute in the generation novel, where the delving back into recent times past so readily induces nostalgia. Saul Maloff has remarked on 'the sustaining vision of the ancient life of coherent community poised against the atomic life of rapacious capitalism - as close an approach as Sillitoe will make to ideology, a kind of pastoral anarchism.' (112) The softening blur of nostalgia that such a view presents will destroy the novelist's political points: 'things weren't so bad, we had a good organic time in the good old organic days, etc.' Yet utterly to reject the material ideologically, is to cut off most of the novelistic resources - is to leave little out of which to build the novel.

In creating a past, the novelist puts a value on the remembered

detail simply by remembering it. By recreating the texture of life in the depression, the value residing in the artifact of the fictional recreation tends to spread across into the life recreated. Sillitoe's strategy is to divide his material. He distinguishes between the deadening, destructive, oppressed existence of Seaton living on the dole, and the semi-rural retirement of old Merton. The glow of nostalgia for times remembered, the fictional glow of creation, operates around the Merton sections giving the novel a geniality and positive note: saving it from the prevalent note of rejection of the existence Seaton has to endure. Sillitoe hence avoids the depressing negativity of much proletarian naturalistic fiction, the hopelessness of observed contemporary realities, the sort of thing Georg Lukacs complained of in 'The Ideal of the Harmonious Man in Bourgeois Aesthetics' collected in *Writer and Critic.*

> There is a whole group of seemingly left-wing writers who accept the degradation and destruction of the individual under capitalism as fact; they are indignant and express their indignation in their art; they expose the horror, but they do not depict the human nobility in the resistance to this horror. (98) They reject without compromise all ideals of beauty and harmony as 'out-of-date'; they take people and society 'as they are', or rather as they usually appear in ordinary life under capitalism. And in a depiction of such a given world, the categories of the old aesthetics do indeed lose meaning. Not because they are out-of-date ... But they have lost all meaning since capitalism is destroying their social and individual base day by day; and these writers set out to represent a world destroyed and not the battle against destruction, not a dynamic process but a lifeless result. The consequence is that they reject beauty and harmony and produce a mere chronicle of the 'iron age'. (100-1)

Sillitoe avoids the drabness that Lukacs complained of in the naturalists, but at a cost. He ends up establishing as a positive the rural existence of an older generation, the nostalgic 'pastoral anarchism'. He accepts the recurrent analysis of English fiction - things were better in the past in the country. Rejecting urban industrial life as it is lived now, he lets the weight of the novel's

hope fall to a large degree on rural retirement. This comes close to being the 'answer', as the Garth's rural life was for the urban muddle of *Middlemarch* to George Eliot. In *Key to the Door* Brian Seaton doesn't go off to live with his acre and his cow - the Malayan material offers a new perspective. But in the later *A Start in Life* (1970) Michael Cullen, emerging from a similar Nottingham background, having gone through his criminal life and spell in gaol, comes out and settles down on his deserted country railway station. At the end of *The Flame of Life* Dawley and Handley are both settled into this rural privatism. In *Key to the Door,* however, old Merton's rural retirement isn't seen as a possibility for the future, but a fading past; by the end of the novel, the city has encroached on and spread over his rural area. He belonged to a generation that no longer exists. The note is Lawrentian - the destruction of rural independence and the establishment of urban alienation that we see in *The Rainbow.*

D. H. Lawrence is a perpetual presence behind *Key to the Door,* in the shared Nottingham locales, in the generational structure, in the portrayal of Seaton's marriage to Vera, the notation of their courting and of the quarrels of their marriage. 'I've read everything he's written', Sillitoe replied to Brendan Hennessy in response to a question about Lawrence's influence on him; 'I think I was influenced by him in my early writing - before I was published' (109). But the influence is strongly apparent in *Key to the Door*:

She poked ashes through the grate and screwed up a newspaper, shivering in the damp cold. Seaton came down: 'Get out of my bastard way' - pushing by and sitting in an armchair to pull on his boots. She spread sticks over the paper. 'Why don't you wash your foul mouth out?' she cried, knowing how true it was that their quarrels never began by a stray word and went by slow stages to a climax, but started immediately at the height of a wild destructive battle, persisting with violent intensity to blows, or degenerating to a morose energy-less condition often lasting for days. There seemed no halfway stage between a taunting fray, and a loving happiness. Vera could not switch her moods with Seaton's speed, and so detested his fussiness between quarrels, treating him at the best with brittle gaiety and reserve. She had tried controlling her retorts in the hope of finding some other

man in Seaton who never quarreled, who was kind all the time, who would love her in spite of them both, only to discover that no such breadth existed in him. For six months after Brian was born he had been near to this, but the novelty of a baby soon wore off.(1.3;49)

And overall Sillitoe offers less than Lawrence here. Committed to a naturalistic mode, he gives the documentary detail of the Seatons' life, but without any of the psychic, spiritual, religiose overlay of natural rhythms, blood consciousness and so on. That peculiarly Lawrentian vision of harmonies and disharmonies, of supra-naturalistic forces and rhythms, Sillitoe deliberately excludes. Sillitoe's rationalistic naturalism has no room for such things. For someone committed to a rational, materialist, scientific political analysis, the intellectual decision to exclude the Lawrentian dark gods and blood consciousness is understandable. But the fictional consequences are unfortunate. By covering such similar documentary materials to Lawrence, Sillitoe' s restriction of his range to the purely documentary gives his work in comparison a thinner, slighter air. The refusal to shape his material, the commitment to documentary naturalism, gives *Key to the Door* a quality of undifferentiated reportage. Some of it strikes particular chords of nostalgia - the visit to the music hall - but overall it lacks any meaning other than itself, the surfaces of documentation. The scrap heap section in chapter 5 where Brian and Bert scavenge the tips for salvable refuse, remains as simply one episode in a childhood. The symbolic potential of the material is not exploited. Mr. Boffin's dust heaps in *Our Mutual Friend* offer a powerful and pervasive image in that novel of capitalist accumulation, of what the Capeks later characterized as the bourgeois's dung beetle propensities. In *Key to the Door*, however, the scrap heaps remain a locale. They make points about poverty, they make points about waste - the dumped loads of fish when Brian and Bert are hungry; later we see them having to scrounge leftovers from a fish and chip shop. But larger resonances fail to operate. There is nothing to distract from the naturalistic.

Occasionally some symbolic extensions seem intended. The slum clearance at the beginning of the novel involves a display of bombing by the Royal Air Force to demolish the houses. The

incident is given some emphasis:

Each plane purred loudly along the rooftops, like a cat at first, then growling like a dog when you try to take its bone away, finally as if a roadmender' s drill were going straight to the heart, so that he felt pinned to the ground. Two black specks, then two more, slid from the rounded belly of each. The gloved wheels beneath seemed to have been put down specially to catch them, but the dots fell through and disappeared into the group of ruined houses.
'Now for it,' somebody announced, and an enormous cracking sound, a million twig power went six times into the sky - followed by the muffled noise of collapsing walls somewhere in the broken and derelict maze.
A policeman's horse reared up, tried to climb an invisible stairway leading from the explosions, then saw sense and merely stood nodding its head and foaming. A bleak scream came from some woman at the back of the crowd and Brian saw her led away by men in black and white uniforms. 'Is she frightened, dad?'
'Yes.'
'Well, I'm not, are you?'
'No.' But Seaton lifted him down, dragged him roughly out of the crush.
'Is that the end, dad?'
'Stop asking bleddy questions, will yer?' Brian caught his mood, and the bomb that had lodged itself inside his chest suddenly burst, scattering more blind havoc than the actual grenades sent from the flight of planes. 'Stop cryin', will yer?' Seaton tugged at him angrily.' (1.1;19-20)

But apart from looking forward to the war, the bomb carries little significance within the novel's structure. Although it might be possible to deduce significances for the episode - an establishment display of military force against the homes of the proletariat - a warning of who has the military strength in this society (and even the St. John's Ambulance men have uniforms close to the fascist blackshirts) - these are not sustained. Indeed, the attempts to unify the novel by recurrent symbols often seem clumsy and contrived:

the mention of Abyssinia in connexion with the brief allusion to Mussolini's invasion (II.6; 90) is picked up in the visit to the music hall where Brian asks if one of the performers is 'the Abyssinian Queen' (II.6; 100), recalled by old Merton when he sees Brian courting (IV.24; 363). But it remains a somewhat mechanical, unconnotative image; implicitly it can be seen to offer a political comment on Brian's involvement in Malaya that the novel later deals with - the British presence there comparable to the fascist invasion. But this is never substantiated in the novel's evidence; it remains merely a label, an unsupported assertion.

Although *Key to the Door* in part can be seen as filling out the environment of *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* the choice of Brian Seaton as protagonist instead of the earlier Arthur gives it a different direction and emphasis. There are allusions to the mood of the first novel - in Brian's fight with the husband of the woman he has been drinking with - but these are somewhat perfunctory and, in the wider context of *Key to the Door*, less interesting. The emphasis is on Brian's developing bookishness, something his siblings jeer at, something he shares with other Sillitoe heroes (Dawley of the trilogy, Cullen of *A Start in Life).* This auto-didacticism opens wider horizons for him, allows for his political education. Unlike his father, trapped in illiteracy, Brian is given an awareness of other possibilities, other worlds. But the biggest breakthrough for him is his military service in Malaya. And this is the biggest break with the Nottingham proletarian milieu of the earlier works; a break, moreover, that is naturalistically motivated, that is meaningfully representative, through the exigencies of conscription. I remember on first reading the novel in 1961 that the Malayan material seemed the least interesting part of the book - it seemed an intrusion into the proletarian material, a distraction from Sillitoe' s proper concerns. Returning to it ten years later, it was the Malayan material that seemed the most alive. In the Malayan material Sillitoe was in advance of his British contemporaries; his selecting this episode, seeing connexions between imperialist oppression in Asia and industrial capitalist oppression in Britain, were rare insights in 1961. If we can now see Malaya as Britain's Vietnam this is due not to the analyses of Britain's writers or intellectuals, but to drawing analogies from the U.S.A. situation. Even though Sillitoe does not define the connexions between

imperialism and industrial capitalism, even though in 1961 the political analyses were not so widely accessible, novelistically he indicates them by his juxtaposition, his crosscutting, between Brian in Nottingham and Brian in Malaya. The parallels are intuitively perceived to exist: a Marxist position provides the analytical mode to demonstrate how they exist. It is a weakness that Sillitoe only began to point towards them, that his presentation of working class documentary excludes his offering a wider span of economic, imperialist, political and military inter-relationships. We are familiar with that sort of case now from the analyses of the U.S.A.'s Vietnam involvement. But in 1961 it was a bold, imaginative realization to offer the Malayan material in this context.

And shocking. The incident with the Chinese guerilla read pretty well treasonably in 1961, before the great social and cultural watershed of Vietnam. The Chinese attacks Brian with a kriss. They fight, Brian manages to force him to drop his weapon, and then lets him go:

'Get moving,' he said, half afraid the man might be crazy and make another rush. 'Piss off - threatening to kill him should he refuse.
‘Words as if spoken by another person deep in his own mind told him he was a bandit, though Brian repressed the thought as being the safest thing for the man before him and for himself. Maybe he doesn't understand English: 'Scoot, for - ' But the man lost his bewilderment and neutral face of capture, turned and leapt along the level of the jungle, scrambling away fast.’ (IV.27; 47)

This confrontation with the Chinese - who may have been a guerilla or a bandit, but this is never clarified - is in essence a spontaneous, intuitive act. It is not based on a thought-out attitude to Malayan communism for Brian knows nothing about that; even his conversations with Mimi, the bar-girl, never examine political issues. The origins of the Malayan communist movements and its objectives are never explored. We see the war there from Brian's alienated, ignorant position. He doesn't understand its issues, and there is no way to understand the issues - the RAF troops are given a lecture on the British Achievement in Malaya (which

Sillitoe paraphrases) but there is never any analysis of the guerilla position. It is a revolution in another country observed by an outsider. Brian acts spontaneously, without any rational basis, without any intellectual debate. But it is not a spontaneous act of the absurd, not a moment of irrationality - the typical action of a novel of the 1950s. It arises from Brian's basic anti-authoritarianism, his dislike of officials and officers, his identification of his interests with those of the Malayan communists, without ever realising what communism means.

It is the very spontaneity of this action, of course, that various critics found hard to take. Irving Howe complains that Brian

> is meant to be not merely an instinctive rebel, but a rebel searching for a rationale by which to live and act, so that his refusal to fire at the Communist guerillas comes to be 'the key to the door', the act of defiance by which he develops the meaning of his anger.
> As the story develops, however, Sillitoe fails to justify Seaton's concluding act. Nothing that has been shown to us, other than a few bare hints concerning Communist shop stewards in England, warrants the supposition that Seaton would refuse to shoot or would have any understanding as to why he refuses. More important, nothing in the novel indicates that Sillitoe himself has thought through the significance of the conclusion he provides. Can the easy-going and anarchic nihilism of the Seatons be reconciled with a fraternal gesture towards Communist troops, and if so, what is the valuation Sillitoe would have us put upon it? For Seaton does not refuse to shoot the guerillas because they are fellow human-beings; presumably, if they were of another political color, his hand would not tremble at the gun. A humanitarian or ethical justification for his conduct is thus ruled out, while a political one remains unproved; all that is left, then, is a gratuitous and sentimental gesture.' (25-6)

It is not simply that a political motivation is unproved, Sillitoe *stresses* Brian's political ignorance. Earlier in the novel, after a discussion at the youth club, one of the organisers says she will bring a socialist along to talk to them. We never see this visit, and there is no reason to think that Brian's political education is ever

supplemented by this talk. In Malaya, Knotman challenges Brian's self-labelling; Brian has been thinking, 'I call myself communist, and yet I'm slave-laboured into building these sandbag ramparts to keep them out.'

'You're not a communist, Brian,' Knotman had said when they got talking politics the other night. 'not from what I know of you anyway.' 'Well I'm not part of this system, I'll tell you that.' 'I don't blame you,' Knotman went on, 'because I don't think anybody would be in their right mind, but most of the world isn' t in its right mind, though I expect it will be one day.' 'What do you think I am then?' Brian asked. 'You might be a socialist when you've read more and know a bit about it.' 'Hitler was a socialist,' Brian laughed, 'a national socialist, and I don't want anything to do with a nut like him.' 'He wasn' t a socialist,' Knotman informed him patiently, 'he only said he was to deceive the workingman. He was sucking up to big business, and they used him to rob the Jews and stamp on the workingman eventually. They fell for it as well. No, if you're anything you're a socialist-anarchist.' 'Maybe,' Brian admitted, but he knew that all men were brothers and that the wealth of the world should be pooled and divided fairly among those who worked, doctors and labourers, architects and mechanics. That's what those on the other side of the sandbags feel, and even though they might not, as Knotman averred, be true socialists, he was still building up sandbags to keep them out. At least, my eyes have been opened. All I've got to do now is learn to see with them, and when one person sees, maybe the next one will as well. 'It's a matter of time,' Knotman said, 'before the world unites, not only the workers either. It's taking the long way round to get there at the moment,' he laughed, 'but that's a thing that often happens.' 'Don't you think you should do something about it though, to help it?' Brian persisted. 'Yes, but no more than you can without being untrue to yourself. History is on our side, so just bide your time: you won't even know when to act; the first thing you know you'll be acting and in the right way.' Brian found these words unsatisfactory to his nature, because in the jungle the communists had acted and he'd seen it with his own eyes, felt their bullets spinning and travelling around him.' (IV.28; 439-40)

In this stressed context of Brian's confusion about politics, his uncertainties about communism, his gesture with the Chinese appears not so much a gesture of solidarity, but an anarchic defiance of authority - of the RAF ethos personified by the officer Odgeson with whom he had just had an exchange about the British establishment:

'All I said,' Brian said, 'was that this was the last time I'm going to be a pin on a bloody map. And I meant it. And nobody's going to stop me saying what I feel.'
'All right, so you've said it. But if you say it once more you'll be on a charge when we get back to camp. I don't care how near the boat you are.'
'Brian was the last to move, looked through the trees over the three of them forming the bottom loop of a letter S - Odgeson leading. We argue and the slob throws his rank, but I've got something to throw at him in my hand: I could put a bullet into his sanctimonious mug and nobody would be much the wiser.' (IV.27; 413)

Brian's fury with what Odgeson represents has as much a part in his motivation as any hypothetical communist solidarity. It is impossible to accept the episode with the Chinese as an expression of solidarity, since it isn't even certain that the Chinese is a communist. Moreover, what use is a gesture of solidarity that cannot be understood? The Chinese's inability to comprehend what Brian means serves to express a larger incomprehension than the simply linguistic. How can a member of the imperialist oppressed make it clear to the 'enemy' that they share the same oppression? There was a higher proportion of blacks in the U.S. forces in Vietnam than per head of the population in the U.S.A. The oppressed are always socially, culturally and economically forced into a complicity in the oppression of others. Brian's position is an absurd one, fighting on behalf of his own oppressors. Knotman has earlier tried to express his own dilemma. After his discharge

they can get somebody else to guard their played-out Empire then. Not that they won't though: there's one born every minute. They've made use of me for seven years, and now I'm going to

do all I can to balls *them* up. Not by way of revenge, mind you: it's just second nature, and I'll enjoy doing it in a lighthearted sort of way.' He spoke in an easy, yet tired voice, giving Brian the impression that maybe it was possible to undermine the British Empire all by himself. 'Sure, sure, I volunteered to stay on in the air force,' having expected Brian to point this out - 'but I was crazy, I admit that. I thought the Germans would want keeping under a few more years, but from fighting fascism I found myself helping the fascists out here. All I want to do now is get my hands on some hard work for a change, and if any of the friends I make happen to say they believe in the British Empire I'll be in a good position to tell 'em a few things about it.' (IV.23; 342-3)

And Brian realizes his own position talking to Mimi:

'This war's nothing to do with you,' she said. 'You should get out as quickly as you can.'
'Not much it ain't. I was dragged into the air force against my will and now they want me to fight the communists. I'm no mug. I've learned a thing or two in my life. They can fight their wars themselves.' (IV.25; 383)

Rejecting 'them', Brian makes a pacific gesture with the Chinese. He refuses to follow through the imperialist oppressors' expectation that he should kill. He refuses to shoot. It is not a purely ethical, Christian pacifism - as Irving Howe realizes; it is a pacific response in a particular context. And Brian's gesture is anarchic rather than revolutionary. Despite his broodings about Odgeson, he doesn't shoot his officer, though the idea has been mooted in the novel in recollections of such episodes in World War I. He hasn't handed the gun over to the Chinese. He has refused to participate in aggression, rather than moving across to a position of activist solidarity. His action, of course, leaves the Chinese free to continue his aggression. And the dilemma later is acute; by letting him go, did Brian cause the death of Baker? Was the Chinese indeed a guerilla and did he come back with other guerillas and ambush the party? The question of what sort of identity the English proletarian can have with a Chinese communist guerilla is brought up again; as far as the

Chinese is concerned, Brian is one of the imperialist aggressors. And the possibility hangs there that Brian's gesture has resulted in Baker's death.

Key to the Door ends on this note of dilemma, not certainty. It ends with a problem, not commitment. It is not until *The Death of William Posters* that the protagonist positively identifies with a third world liberation movement. There Dawley joins the FLN and fights with them in Algeria. Brian's anarchic rejection of British establishment authority becomes Dawley's positive commitment to revolutionary war. Sillitoe' s theme of the futility of war that Dmitri Shestakov remarked on is replaced - temporarily - by a leap into a commitment to revolutionary war.

The cross-cutting between Brian in Malaya and Brian in Nottingham suggested a political analysis that was not fulfilled - that perhaps could not be fulfilled. The alienation of Brian from his society and from any understanding of other societies is emphasized. And this issue is open-ended, unresolved. The pacific gesture to the Chinese is at odds with the violence of the Seaton life style and milieu. John Rosselli remarked of Sillitoe' s first three books that their characters, offered no outlet in political violence, could only manage 'interior explosions of a hatred that fights, as much as anything, itself'. In the English political climate of the 1950s and early 1960s, the possibilities of political violence were not seen to exist. Even events like the Notting Hill race riots were seen as an isolated and nonpolitical phenomenon. There could only be discontinuity between the aggrieved aggression of the Seatons, and the slow, alienated processes of social democratic party politics. Sillitoe's novels stress this alienation, this blockedness, this lack of a sense of possibilities for ideology or action, of the British proletariat. The violence of the Seatons remains undirected, unrelated to a political outlet. As Nigel Gray writes of Arthur in *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning,*

> when you get down to brass tacks it appears that he has only been fighting with his mouth. This is not to deny that there is plenty of actual violence (as well as violent fantasy), but it is never directed at the authorities.(128)

But with the trilogy, Dawley goes to Algeria and joins the FLN

and though Britain is still in a state of placidity, revolutionary war is discussed and planned by the painter Albert Handley, his sons, and his brother John. Sillitoe still has to resort to crosscutting. The new English revolution has not begun. The realities of the FLN struggle are juxtaposed with a potential, a possibility, a planning of revolution that might be for real, or that might merely be the game of an artist, a madman, and adolescents: when volume 3 appeared, it was revealed as just that game. With the first volume of the trilogy, *The Death of William Posters* (1965) the working class background is taken as read. At the novel's opening, Frank Dawley has already walked out on his 'responsibilities' of wife, child and job that have pinned him down socially and economically. We know what that is all about from the earlier novels, and it is not repeated. And through Dawley, Sillitoe attempts to explore other classes of England - the middle class nurse and her advertising-man husband she is separated from; the primitive painter, Albert Handley, his discontented teenage daughter Mandy and his mad brother John; the intellectual Myra and her culture figure husband. But although some of the documentary surfaces of these worlds are caught - the nurse's house, Myra's trendy intellectual comfort - any further meanings are missing. Perhaps there aren't any; the material itself is not examined in depth. There is little of especial interest in these people. This is Dawley's discovery, driving him south and out of England to revolution.

One of the issues the trilogy raises is expatriation. In part Dawley's journey is Sillitoe's own journey- moving through the possibilities of English life, the class strata, and finding nowhere to settle, nothing to dwell on, so heading further south into exile. And then the intellectual and political decisions for expatriation cause conflict with the writer's relationship to his material - especially if he still feels a need to deal with the material, with his original environment. Igor Hajek asked Sillitoe 'would you be able to continue writing about England while living in another country?' Sillitoe replied:

‘I'm absolutely sure I would. Even after ten or twenty years spent abroad. Actually I lived in Spain from 1952 to 1958 without any contacts with home. And it was there, in Fascist Spain, that I wrote *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* and part of *Key to*

the Door. It is a desperate measure, however, for a writer to leave his country. And not all can stand the separation.' (123)

And talking to Brendan Hennessy Sillitoe said:

'If you're a writer I think you can't live too much in your own country. I like England- I love it, but I don't like it- I have to get out. I lived in France and Spain for six years. It gave me a distance from which to look at the things in England I wanted to write about.' (112)

Hennessy commented, 'I've always thought it strange that many English writers now seem to have the opposite attitude,' to which Sillitoe replied, 'I think they are frightened - I don't know why they are frightened. My impulse has always been to get out' (112).

The journey Dawley makes is a writer's journey, moving away from the familiar and fully written proletarian background, into other possibilities for material. These possibilities are the sorts Sillitoe might have encountered in a literary career; they are not especially convincing for Dawley to encounter, nor especially necessary. Dawley leaves his wife and job and after randomly driving around England and finding how small it is, he calls at a house where a nurse lives alone, has an affair with her for a while; in the village he meets Albert Handley, a painter, poacher, and writer of begging letters; and through Handley's sudden achievement of fame, he meets Myra at a gallery opening in London. The connexions are plausible enough. But what is missing is any central reason for these encounters. Having explored the working class world, Sillitoe is now launched on a class cross-section of Britain.

But there is an arbitrariness about that material which we do not find in George Eliot's *Felix Holt* or *Middlemarch.* The stable, middle class viewpoint from which she was able to view, range and place in perspective and position, no longer holds. So that we are left with an inchoate, random impression of England. The change from George Eliot's vision of organic interrelation, of community, is a mark of a social and political change in Britain; in literary terms, however, it is also a falling away of interest. It would be impossible and invalid to write a *Middlemarch* now; but a new literary form, a new way of dealing with the incoherent and

random, hasn't been evolved for English material. And it is as if Sillitoe isn't interested enough in the characters he chooses to bother to evolve something. So many of them are there to be rejected. Rejecting them on social and political grounds, Sillitoe has ended up rejecting his material. For a writer 'committed to the revolutionary destruction of English society, the only possibility is a rejection of English materials; an honest appraisal of English society could only assure him that such a revolution was in the 60s and 70s unlikely to be generated internally by the English. One or two figures, maybe, like Dawley, he can put faith in. But the rest, politically, have to go; so fictionally they go too - their dismissal cannot sustain the novel. It was a process Lawrence found himself getting into, too.

A democratic revisionist might write lovingly or amusingly or ironically about the foibles of the English, even occasionally seeing some slow onward drift to liberal democracy potential or emergent, unlikely as that seems. But that is not possible for Sillitoe. Moreover, Sillitoe's proletarian and political judgement on English society combines with a current lack of conviction amongst many serious novelists about the viability of the novel of bourgeois realism, and its various adaptations - naturalism, socialist realism. There is little faith any more in the cumbersome fabrications of realism - in its particular representational traditions, in its laborious plotting. The ambitious trilogy was built on very shaky foundations.

Still writing about England, yet rejecting figures like the nurse's weak advertising copywriter husband and Myra's weak intellectual husband, easy Clifford Chatterley targets, leaves Sillitoe in an ambivalent, unresolved position. Dawley moves south to Algeria. And the saviour figure is Shelley, an American who has a similar role to the Canadian Knotman in *Key to the Door*. Both are outside the English class structure, both have a North American tradition of egalitarianism and independence instead of English servility or superiority, both have a shady, slightly shifty side to them, an aura of sharpness or criminality which distinguishes them from the purely theoretical left.

His favourite books were those works on guerilla warfare, by Mao Tse Tung, Ngoyen Giap, and Che Guevara - authors who for him had taken their place in world literature even before Shakespeare and Tolstoy. Shelley lived by the principles of

guerilla warfare. The enduring maxim of Sun Tzu: 'Uproar in the East, strike in the West' was the basis of exercises which combined intellect and imagination whenever there was time to kill before catching boat or train. Walking the streets he staged uprisings in that particular town; on the train he laid ambushes in the passing terrain; pacing the beach he planned clandestine landings. 'Life is war, but guerilla war, not the old artificial war that the world's lived with up to now. One of the deepest instincts of Man is to conquer by stealth, to create an uproar at one point while striking with deadly effect at another.' His one unalterable dream was to see Madison Avenue and its thousand commerces erupt into smoke and flame. (III.22; 278-9)

The romantic component in Shelley is anyway indicated by his name. But his seriousness is not put in question and he grows in stature in the second volume, *A Tree on Fire.* His death from gangrene after being wounded in an FLN engagement with the French serves to create a value for him, a final seriousness. The undercutting, a strange prudish rejection of his diaries which turn out to be 'pornographic' materials, occurs in the final volume, *The Flame of Life.*

The Algerian material is powerfully written, but it does not support the entire novel - it is too partial, too fragmentary. There is no sense of what the war is about, what the issues are, what the larger strategy is: simply the small focus on Frank Dawley in the desert, gunfire, an attack on an aerodrome, chase. Frank is with the FLN by impulse; there is no picture of Algeria established for us to evaluate his decision to join the revolutionary army. We are given the hardships, the physical surfaces; but no meanings.

Discussing Malraux in *Towards a Sociology of the Novel*, Lucien Goldmann raises an issue immediately relevant to Sillitoe:

Now Malraux, and of course most of the critics felt this, remains a Western writer concerned with the problems of the West. If, in order to write novels of the revolution, he situates their action in China and Spain, it is because the revolutionary movements occur there and because, when writing a work of realistic ambitions, he must situate its action as close as possible to reality. It seems to me however that, in these novels and perhaps in the

thinking of most left-wing intellectuals of the time, one can find *no trace* of any awareness of a fact that has become obvious for us today: namely, that China in particular and the non-industrialized countries in general have their own problems, different from those that arise in Western societies, and that different evolutions are taking place in both groups of countries.' (37)

Sillitoe is aware of the issue. He is not one of those writers who attempts to deal with third world revolution. The material of the third world revolutions he includes in his fictions, is material that he presents in an English context. His English protagonists relate to the materials in ways that are important for their role or potential role in England. Malaya, Algeria are not the subjects of Sillitoe' s novels; they are the settings of illustrative material relevant to someone contemplating social change, the possibility or impossibility of revolution, in England. Dawley's fighting in Algeria is devoid of political meanings for Algeria. The stress is on guerilla experience, not on ideology. The meanings emerge from the cross-cutting with England, with the Handleys.

Handley's anarchic household is an outrage to English conservatism, order, stability, convention. But perhaps because it is such an outrage, it is unconvincing, unlikely. Handley, the painter, has a brother John who returned from World War II in a state of collapse. A wireless operator (like Brian in *Key to the Door)* he now spends his life tapping out messages to nowhere. Initially we seem to be presented with someone utterly mad, a victim of the war; his first appearance is the extraordinary episode where Dawley wandering randomly around Handley's house quickly has sex with the daughter Mandy and then, trying to find his way downstairs, accidentally walks into the wireless operator's room and John pulls a gun on him. The incident stops at that, unexplained. In part two of the trilogy, however, *A Tree on Fire* (1967) John is given a larger role:

His amiable and highly cultured presence had dominated the Handley household for longer than most of them could remember. He had educated Richard and Adam from the age of five in the romance and ethics of revolution, in the mechanics

of insurrection. (111.24; 290-1)

His role is central, and he serves to articulate the meanings Sillitoe has been moving his fiction towards.

He switched off his high-powered receiver, laid down his earphones, and passed an hour eating, and idly looking through his notebook: 'Turn your back on politics,' it said. 'Politics have nothing to do with Revolution.' On another page: 'The American rocket and bomber bases must be treated as were German bases in occupied France during the war. Adopt the attitudes of the French Resistance to the Nazis. And not only the land of the bases, but also the land of the fox-hunters must come under the hammer. The police, the armed forces, civil defence personnel are an army of occupation. Those who join their ranks are traitors. Those who sit on jury service are traitors. Those who hold state secrets and do not try to divulge them to an enemy or to make them public knowledge are also traitors.' He read more: 'The people, by acquiescing to the possibility of nuclear war are giving in to their own death-wish, since they have allowed themselves to be diverted from their ability to become large in spirit and carry out a revolution. The ruling class prefer this death-wish to permeate and operate rather than that the will to revolution should develop. That is presumably what they mean by being better dead than Red. They are already dead. But are they dead beyond the powers of resurrection?
'All the time one must be ready. All through life one must educate and train oneself for the Revolution, imagine it in all its detail and in a thousand permutations. One must breathe and live for the Revolution, because a revolution is a mystical occurrence as much as something which is brought about and controlled by organisation. It is a healthy state of mind. The perfect and ordered world around one can crumble in a week, and one must be ready to step in and stoke up the fires of destruction in order that you may build when they have gone out - but not until.
'A revolution is not an impossible pipe-dream in this small old fashioned country. One must make a career of helping to bring about the Revolution in face of the imponderable forces of inanition. This modem world could become prehistoric and half-

empty in four flat minutes, and until that time the only political philosophy will be that of Positive Nihilism.' (III.24; 291-2)
Although there had always been a political context to Sillitoe' s writing, there had never been anything programmatic, no solutions or suggestions, until this point. John Handley's jottings offer something for the first time: 'a revolution is not an impossible pipedream in this small old-fashioned country ... ' In the Handley household plans are made; in Algeria Frank Dawley is getting first hand experience.

But how much hope is there? Once again, there is an ambivalence. John's assertion is the only assertion of faith there is of revolutionary change in Britain. But later John suicides on returning to England after his expedition to find Dawley:

The gullshit cliffs loomed out of drizzle and mist, sending a pain of hopeless love through him. England, he thought, if only you could begin again from nakedness, become a green infant born from the soil and salt sea, put a coat on your back of all colours, and start in intelligence and gentleness, but without me, without me. (V.32; 417)

Conrad called his country of revolution in *Nostromo* gullshit, too - Costaguana - to express his contempt for the political, his sense of the futility of revolutionary change; here the contempt is for the lack of revolutionary change. With the final volume of the trilogy, John's vision becomes less and less tenable: the prospect of revolution in England seems more and more to have been 'an impossible pipe-dream.'

John's suicide is a rejection of England, paralleling Sillitoe' s fictional rejection. In *A Tree on Fire* Sillitoe seems to have found the English material increasingly hard to relate to, increasingly intractable and inert. Handley's daughter Mandy drives up and down the Ml motorway in her red Mini, Handley has a futile interview from a journalist, Mandy's boyfriend Ralph steals a painting - these unexpressive and uninteresting episodes suggest a sense of the bankruptcy of English life, there is nothing for Sillitoe to engage in. An American critic, Allen Richard Penner, has claimed (1972) of *A Tree on Fire,* that Sillitoe's

personal sense of exile seems to be grounded in a bitterness and a hatred of his country that has diminished his art rather than elevated it, as it did James Joyce's. In Sillitoe's earlier works, there is an exceptional rendering of a tragic and classical sense of fate: his characters sense that they may not be destined to win now, in economic or legal terms, yet they battle on with a spirited, fustian vainglory that is in itself a victory of the human spirit. In his most recent novels Sillitoe has abandoned this sense of fate and adopted a determination to win through armed rebellion the economic and social battles in which his heroes are engaged. From the heroes' point of view, and from the authors', this is good politically, economically, and philosophically; from the critic's point of view, aesthetically, it is not, for in Sillitoe's current writings the winning of these battles seems to be expressible only in terms of martial 'liberation'.

This extraordinary comment makes a much better case for the value of the shift in direction of Sillitoe's trilogy, than the criticism it intends. Sillitoe's refusal to rest in an easy, inert, tragic sense that can be lauded by the academic critic, has led to a violent rejection of those so called 'aesthetic' values; there is something contemptible about an aesthetic that can admire the hopeless exploitation and defeat of a people. Trying to shift out of such a pastoral passivity, and its concomitant celebration of the economic and spiritual pauperisation of the proletariat, Sillitoe has offered these revolutionary novels. And their failings come not from the stance of armed liberation, but from the failure to substantiate this stance, from the failure to integrate it with the community it is supposedly to liberate, and from the failure to find the appropriate expressive form for the novel's expressing it.

What is striking about *A Tree on Fire* is that this 'revolutionary' novel is so unconcerned with the economic and social nature of English society. Now certainly we have seen that Sillitoe has dealt with that already. Yet the alienation from those concerns is remarkable here. Partly it is as if his hostility to the society is so great, that he cannot bear to consider it even to work out a strategy for its destruction. It is an understandable position. But what is presented of the society - the Handley household - is so eccentric as to provide no sound basis for analysis. While together with this

failure of documentation is the failure to adopt a new mode. Stylistically *A Tree on Fire* remains a conventional English novel, though the contents of this naturalistic fiction are eccentric and unrepresentative. There is nothing revolutionary about the language or form. The combination of conventionality and eccentricity with the lack of political-social-economic documentation make problematic *A Tree on Fire* as an attempt to write about the English revolution; and the implication is that such a topic anyway is an impossibility. To write about such a theme, the writer inevitably must become eccentric. The theme itself is an impossibility, in art and life- hence John's despair at the impossibility of realizing what he had claimed was not a pipe dream.

The very cross-cutting from Dawley in North Africa to the English materials again emphasizes the unreality, the unrootedness of that English dream of revolution; quite the opposite from *Key to the Door* where the documentary familiarity of the English material cut in with the exotic and new experience of Malaya. Yet even though the North African material has more vigour and reality (we know there was a war going on there) than the English games of planning revolution, it has no more substantiated political basis to it than the English material. The war is just a war Dawley gets involved in. There is no political argument or analysis for Dawley's participation in the FLN struggle. He simply plunges in, intuitively. The nature of the FLN' s ideology and struggle remains as unexamined as that of the Malayan communists in *Key to the Door;* while the meanings that can be extrapolated from Brian Seaton's military service in Malaya are not accessible here. The irrelevance of talking politics yet doing nothing is one of Sillitoe's points, of course. However, by offering intuitive commitment, and dispensing with all the talk, he robs his revolutionary war of any significance. He leaves it presented as no more than the banditry the Malayan fighters were often categorised as. Consequently, when Dawley returns to Britain at the end of *A Tree on Fire,* it is hard to see what he has learned - other than physical endurance. He is able to fight in a revolutionary war, now. But where is the analytic theory that is needed to find out where support will come from, to prepare the propaganda to win over support? As presented, in all its theoretical, ideological vacuum, Dawley might as well have been fighting for the Foreign Legion. Reviewing *The Death of William Posters* Frank

Kermode wrote:

It seems characteristic that the best writing in Sillitoe's last two novels comes at the time of his heroes' self-expression in action, and in a context of guerilla warfare. Give him a small society of men, their ankles tied together with string, lying in ambush for the imperialist French, and he will release his hero and his style at one stroke. *(Modern Essays,* 287)

But the action has no ideological commitment; it could be for any ideology. Once political fiction is moved out of the realm of ideas and into 'pure' action, into engagement in the battle alone, there is this huge problem. Yet until it is moved into engagement, into the fight, it remains stuck in liberal conversation, kitchen anarchism, pipe-dream, fiction.

A Tree on Fire was published in 1967, but though the third volume of the trilogy, *The Flame of Life,* was begun in that year, it was not completed and published until 1974. Sillitoe comments in a prefatory note:

This is a long time for one book, though during that period other items were written that were more urgently pressing. They elbowed the present work aside, which may have been compliant in this because the plot and form of the book weren't so absolutely clear in my mind as they subsequently became over the years. (5)

The intervening seven years had their own effects on the materials of the novel. Marijuana and the women's movement established themselves in English society, while the possibilities of revolutionary activity in England receded even further. While the first two volumes could be seen as building up to a revolutionary scenario, *The Flame of Life* presents bit by bit the collapse of each of the components of that hopeful radical activism. More than that, it offers redefinitions of what has gone before, so that the more deluded, self-aggrandising, crazy and objectively counter-revolutionary components of the events and personalities of the first two volumes are now brought into clearer focus.

After John Handley burned down the house in Lincolnshire, the

whole community moved in with Myra in the south Midlands. But the family

hadn't made much of an impression on Myra's place ... They seemed subdued by a subtle combination of middle-class economy and bourgeois abundance. (3;24)

Handley, now having made it as a painter, supports them all by the money he makes selling his paintings to the rich. The novel opens with him collecting £3,000 from Sir Edward Greensleeves, the gallery owner who exhibits him, even though Greensleeves complains he had £1,000 the previous month. The economic base of the community is established immediately and its shaky foundations: Handley the only one earning, the community producing little itself except maybe a few vegetables. It is no self-sufficient back to the land experiment:

There are a score of us living in our self-styled community, and that means twenty idle mouths to feed. I'm *not* idle, because I happen to be the breadwinner, but I don't mind that because it stimulates me for my work. (1; 10)

What in the first two volumes might have seemed like an experiment in alternative living, a spontaneous anarchist cell from which revolution would be spread, in *The Flame of Life* is revealed as the plaything of an artist; an artist, moreover, who depends on the bourgeoisie and aristocracy for the purchase of his paintings to finance his life style. Handley's background was never proletarian, he has no base from which to build a revolution. 'His father, a small-time builder, had gone bankrupt just in time to retire, a hard old man who'd forced him out to work as soon as it was legal'. (27; 192). He had experienced the deprivation of the petty-bourgeoisie; which, though certainly a deprivation, was one that in a revolutionary crisis would lead him as likely as not to the counter-revolutionaries:

Dawley always knew that Handley only let his sons play at revolution so that he could get on with his painting. If revolution ever became so real that he had no electric light or couldn't get

razor-blades he'd be the first to turn against it. He wanted to paint just as most people wanted to work and live in peace, and as an artist he really did represent mankind in that respect. (27; 196)

Handley's problem is one shared with so many bourgeois artists, that of limited awareness. He can see the contradictions of the community, but fails to perceive his own role as one that involves the largest contradictions. As an artist he observes what is happening; but artists do not passively observe: they manipulate the material in the very act of observation; indeed, Handley like so many artists, manipulates the situations so that what he wants to observe will be manifested:

'It's just an idea for middle-aged people,' Handley said, 'this community. The young ones don't want it, and won't see the need of it till their own kids are grown up by which time it's too late, like it is with me. Cuthbert's trying his best to ruin it. Ralph and Mandy want a nice little cottage thatched with daisies and buttercups so's they can be all lovey-dovey in their pervy way. Adam and Richard are just a couple of lazy bastards pounding out revolutionary ideas in a permanently non-revolutionary society in order to avoid working.' (27; 195)

His attitudes here are revealing, he sees himself as the sole provider, sole believer, holding together a community for the community's advantage against the community's will. It is this sort of thing that makes his son Cuthbert suspect that the community's will has no role in Handley's calculations.

'The only thing that is absolutely necessary, and therefore compulsory, in this community,' Handley began, 'is that everybody above the age of eighteen attend these meetings.' (9;63)

And Handley buttresses his compulsion with the alienations of a television quiz show technology for recording votes; and if our doubts about the nature of compulsory meeting attendance and voting were not enough, this apparatus readily summons up all our equally well founded suspicions about the honesty of TV quiz shows, and perhaps by extension the ballot. Not only does Handley's

technology embody the alienations the community members experience from each other and from the idea of the community, it also allows an easier possibility for the manipulation of the vote in favour of the person who installed the system.

The vote-meter had been rigged up soon after Cuthbert's arrival, and on the floor by each chair was a button that could be pressed whenever a motion was put, buttons so hidden it was impossible to say who assented and who did not. On the wall behind Handley was a huge clockface, a circle with ten divisions, so that if two members voted for a proposal the needle swung over that number of segments, and on the rare occasions of unanimity it turned full circle. Agreement was reached if six of the ten parts were covered.
Handley was proud of his democratic installation, but Cuthbert suspected it was fixed in his father's favour, suggesting at each session that everyone sit in a different place to the one they had held before, especially Handley, since Cuthbert believed that his foot-button had several times the lighting-power of any other.
The proposal had been defeated, as any would while Handley kept his present seat. But even if the gadget did not cheat it seemed an insult to the more subtle mechanics of the human make-up, a typical innovation of his father who fell for any modern contraption that came along. Cuthbert thought that one day, when his father was in town, he'd call an electrician and have the wires checked. (8;56)

The prose veers in and out of endorsing Cuthbert's suspicions ('The proposal had been defeated, as any would while Handley kept his present seat'). But even if the apparatus isn't fixed in Handley's favour, the very assumptions embodied in it and the aura it exudes express Handley's mistrust, and his reified, scientific-technological drive to dominate and control while keeping his hands clean. He sees the community as a machine that should be run like his vote-meter, his foot on the occasional pedal - touching the accelerator of a car, not physically hauling any load himself.

After each meal Handley went to his studio, and everyone thought he was working. They got on with their chores and

duties, and grumbled while the days and hours passed, but thought it worthwhile because it allowed the great man to do his immortal painting. (23;165)

His wife broods on the situation that has developed - the way Handley has become increasingly alienated from daily activity, the labour-saving machines he has introduced to cut himself off from 'unrewarding' chores now permeating his life-attitudes, and cutting him off from her:

There wasn't much work to do, and maybe that was the trouble. There were more willing hands than necessary, as well as dishwashers, vacuum-cleaners, washing-machines; a fully automated house run by as many people as if there were no gadgets at all. It was Handley's little plaything of a community, a modern doll's house of the selfish man complete with furniture and more people to play around with. The only sensible member of it was Dawley's wife Nancy, who'd left as soon as she saw what was going on. (23;168)

And for all the introduction of labour-saving machines, the allocation of tasks is still determined in a traditional, sexist fashion. This is something no one even thinks about until Maricarmen, mistress of the dead Shelley, arrives in the community from Spain. She asks:

'Do the men cook?'
‘Handley's head jerked up: 'We have study groups going, and do work in the garage. I paint all the time. There are one or two idle bastards among us, but we pull our weight - by and large.' (15;109)

Once she has settled in, Maricarmen remarks to Myra:

'It's not what I'd call a liberal community the men plotting revolution and equality, and the women kept at their traditional labour.' (17;123)

She proposes

'Everyone over eighteen, male or female, should do a day's work in the kitchen. That would include Mr. Handley, who may be an artist, but even an artist has to eat.' (17; 123)

And it is Maricarmen who exposes another non-radical assumption of the community; the two *au pair* girls Maria and Cataline have never been given a vote, unthinkingly treated by Handley as further labour-saving devices. But though Maricarmen introduces a vote for the au pair girls and a kitchen roster that involves the men, the community is still doomed. These reforms cannot save something that is inauthentic from the beginning; the purpose of the 'community' was never for the communal good, but for Handley's painting. And Maricarmen's purpose in arriving was not to correct deviations from the revolutionary good, but to kill Dawley for causing Shelley's death. Maricarmen, the revolutionary now released from a Spanish gaol, is wasting her energies in the pursuit of revenge. She has been invited over to the community because she has Shelley's papers - Dawley thinks they might be useful for him in the memoir of his guerilla activities he is writing; Handley has an artist's curiosity to see them.

No one is showing much revolutionary consciousness. And all the doubts about Dawley's revolutionary understanding are now confirmed - not only did he have no clear idea of what he was doing, but his foolhardy commitment to dramatic action did indeed cause Shelley's death:

He did not know with any surety why he had gone to fight for the rebels in Algeria.
True, out of a sense of idealism, and to help the downtrodden of the world after a lifetime of believing that the international socialist brotherhood .of man could cure the evils and inefficiencies of capitalist-imperialism, he had agreed to join Shelley Jones in driving a lorry of guns to the frontier beyond Tafilalet - a practical action that could never be confused with any dream.
After a successful ambush, he persuaded Shelley to go on to the war in Algeria. Shelley knew his limitations, and did not care to enter the battle-zone. But Dawley, drunk on the tactical superiority of the fighting, and the intoxicating though

diminishing noise of their own gunfire, forced him to embark on the most stupid enterprise it was possible to concoct. (16; 114-5)

Notice the shift in Sillitoe-Dawley's stance: the FLN are now called 'rebels', accepting establishment vocabulary judgements. Other disillusions rapidly follow for us. Shelley's notebooks turn out not to be a manual of modern revolutionary practice but pornography. Adam says 'they're only feeble attempts to write dirty stories'; Dawley sees them as 'twisted, fly blown trash ... putrid stuff' (36; 252-3). The language of moral judgement, seemingly endorsed by Sillitoe, is again strangely establishment, English huffy. We are given no examples of the work, so whatever sex and violence associations there conceptually might have been, are not revealed.

The adolescent revolutionaries give up playing with Uncle John's radio equipment and request funding to go to university: Oxford, where else? 'We can put our revolutionary and working class contacts to good use in the student movement'. (43; 286) The shrine to John's memory is dissembled and the radio equipment junked. Dawley, brooding on John's suicide, sees it as the act of a man despairing of the achievement of socialism by violent means.

In Algeria John had seen that the pursuit of equality brought nothing but death and suffering. He realised that almost anything was preferable to the annihilation or crippling of people. (32; 229)

And John's letter from the grave is a renunciation of armed revolution. The anti-war, anti-military note of Sillitoe's earlier work, is reasserted.

Revolution is not the normal enslavement of people which we have seen so far. It must mean liberation into mutual good. It must begin in peace and end in peace. A revolution that does not lead to real equality and real freedom is counter-revolution: it takes us back instead of forward. A revolution that is brought about by War and Civil War is likely to destroy freedom. So stop your false pastimes and theoretical pursuits, and instead convert people to the goodness of Revolution by turning it into a religion, but without idols, without figureheads, without

suffering and killing, and with no more ritual than that of inspired words that will show all people how to understand and love. (42;281)

And so traditional activism is renounced. John recommends 'seek the more spiritual way' (42;281) but there are no signs of anyone following that, either, in *The Flame of Life.* The stress is on the collapse of community, the retreat into individualist privatism. Ralph comes into an inheritance and he and Mandy go off and live on it - parody of the 19th century novel, but less a parody than a tired surrender to a clichéd way out of it all. The note of the novel is one of giving up rather than achieving peace or direction. It is a running down of hopes, a burning and burying and drowning of aspirations - guns, papers, hedgehogs and such like are continually being burned, buried or dropped in the lake.

Amidst the pervading dissolution, are there any signs of regeneration? At best ambiguous ones. Doing the community shopping, Enid, Handley's wife, and Maricarmen, pick up an 18 year old hitch-hiker who ends up staying with the community:

'Hi, there!' said Dean, a hand held out in a friendly manner.
‘Cuthbert ignored it. 'Are you an American, then?'
'No, siree! Just a bit of old Limey down from Nottingham, on my way to hitch-up with some of the lads in London. They've got a grotty pad in the Earls Court.'
‘His language was a prattle of false American and raw Nottingham ...’ (22;159)

His name is Dean William Posters and he starts turning on anyone who wants to be turned on to marijuana. He has walked out of his dead-end factory job to go on the road. In one aspect he is a spiritual son of Frank Dawley, a second version - as Dawley himself realizes.

At thirty he felt old enough to be Dean's father - and found the coincidence of the name with his favourite working-class mythological character amusing. Even the William was prominent in it, William Posters Junior who right from the start, would put up with none of the crap and had slung his hook at so early an age

that he would do little damage to himself or others.' (25; 184)
But Dean is also a reduced English reincarnation of Dean Moriarty, that figure of freedom and energy from Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* (1957) which was published in England the same year as *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (1958) - an alternative myth, coexistent with Sillitoe' s projected possibilities, yet so very different. Sillitoe now creates a character who is trying to escape the etiolation of Britain by following a track the Beats had first trodden in the 1940s and the counterculture of the 1960s had paved. Dean takes off with Enid, neglected wife of Handley, to the Mediterranean and India where they deal drugs - and make enough money in five years to, of all things, buy a small hotel in the south of England. Yet another escape route turns out not to work, yet another possibility is rejected by Sillitoe. Enid becomes bored with Dean, and there they are back in the Old Country, keeping a hotel.

The other possibility of regeneration is Handley's eldest son Cuthbert who has rebelled against his father consistently. First of all he goes to theological college, then drops out. He has an affair with Maricarmen and they go to Spain together at the novel's end. Perhaps the spirituality that led him to toy with theological college, and his inherited anarchic rebelliousness will provide the base for spiritual revolution as recommended by John in his letter from the grave; and allied with Maricarmen's connexions in the anti-Franco anti-fascist movement, actually lead to somewhere. He takes a copy of John's letter with him. At least he has escaped from Britain.

The last chapters tie up the remaining threads and offer no hope. Handley returns to Lincolnshire, rebuilds on the site of the burnt out house, and paints in rural isolation. Dawley's book becomes a success

but as time went on he did not know how to reconcile his revolutionary principles and writings to his life as a normal family man ... They talked about the problem, but he could find no answer. The main thing was that the question continued to gnaw at him. (50; 317)

And the book ends with Dawley's meditations on the possibilities of

keeping the inner light aflame:

The end of life was the fire of life, in which the flame was often invisible, nonexistent. How could one live without this flame? You didn't have to see it to believe it was there. If it was in your heart you could see it spring up in all different places. As long as it stayed in your heart your revolutionary principles were not at variance with the way you lived.
He could wait, and warm himself at his own flame, and let others share it when they needed it. Waiting and guarding your own flame with the faith of your life was justification enough. Because when the call came, when he had waited until he knew what to do, when it was necessary to go out to a cause and do something, then he would do so -but always finally remembering, and being troubled by, the words of Handley's brother John. In the meantime the flame stayed plain, as long as you loved those nearby you would know what to do when the time came.
'And if it never did? he asked himself with the healthy bite of scepticism. While the flame of his heart stayed with him he did not need to answer that question. Life in any case was brief enough. If it never came he still had to live. Yet he knew beyond all doubt that it would come. The world that he knew was made that way. (50;318)

After a period of engagement with the issues of political consciousness, and the possibilities of revolutionary change, Sillitoe has returned to the individual isolation of his first great protagonist, Arthur Seaton. But it is a return at a higher level than Arthur's alienation. A lot has been experienced, rejected, and learned. The violence has been examined and its self-destructive qualities revealed. But the flame remains, that inextinguishable inner light.

Sexual Politics in Kundera's *The Joke*

When racist jokes were outlawed in Britain by the race relations act, Idi Amin, that British-trained officer who had turned on his colonial master, became the focus of their survival. The ugly tradition persisted with an explicit political target; it was tacitly deemed legitimate, patriotic, to concoct obscenities about the big black man who defied British imperialism. Now that sexism is notionally taboo its reservoirs likewise found their outlets in a political guise. Attitudes, values, concepts that were inexpressible amongst the literary political intelligentsia within the western alliance found displaced location in works that could be hailed for their opposition to the communist world. Whatever the role of the sexual in Milan Kundera's work in its original Czechoslovakian context, translated into English it offered illiberal satisfactions for those who could protest that they appreciated it for its politics: much as people allegedly protested that they bought *Playboy* for the fiction. The central incident of Kundera's *The Joke*, the celebration of sex for hatred, sex for revenge on the unwitting, unknowing victim, who is a woman, is the celebration of a variety of rape, of degradation, of a horrific contempt for woman.

There are a number of 'jokes' in *The Joke*. Each leads to another, with the ultimate joke being the way the jokes backfire on the jokester. The initial joke is the postcard Ludvik Jahn sends to his girlfriend Marketa:

Optimism is the opium of the people! A healthy atmosphere stinks of stupidity! Long live Trotsky! Ludvik. (26)

The consequences are unfunny. Ludvik is expelled from the communist party and from the university. 'Having lost the right to continue my studies, I lost the right to defer military service' (39). He does his military service, alongside others not considered trustworthy enough to bear arms, in the mines. These episodes are

recorded in retrospect. The present time of the novel records Ludvik's attempted revenge on Zemanek the party chairman who expelled him, by 'making love' to Zemanek's wife Helena. The revenge likewise backfires, Zemanek by now having a new young girlfriend and being glad to dispose of Helena. Helena falls in love with Ludvik immediately upon their single sexual encounter but Ludvik, realising how his plan has gone wrong, tells Helena his true feelings of distaste for her, upon which she attempts suicide. The final 'joke' is that she takes not analgesics but laxatives, and survives.

The reaction to Ludvik's postcard in its immediate political aspects confirms all those western stereotypes of humorless communist party officials. The carefully studded handful of references to Stalin are the cues for reading this as a metafiction of the purges, of the callousness, cruelty and opportunism of socialist bureaucracies. Zemanek in the present time of the novel presents himself as a fashionable progressive who teaches 'Philosophy' at the university. Ludvik remarks:

I found the nomenclature highly indicative; a few years ago he would have called it *Marxism*, but in recent years it had so declined in popularity, especially among the young, that Zemanek, for whom popularity had always been the main criterion, discretely concealed his Marxism behind the more general term. (227)

Zemanek says to Ludvik:

‘You won't believe this, but on entrance exams when we ask them about the purges, they don't know what we're talking about. Stalin is just a name to them. And most of them have no idea there were political trials in Prague!’ (231)

And in the episode of Ludvik's time with the labour brigade in the mines there is the less comic fate of Alexej:

He'd begun his service at an infantry officers candidate school but was suddenly transferred to us. As it turned out, the notorious show trials were about to begin, and every day, in

Party headquarters, courtrooms, and police stations all over the country, hands were being raised to strip the accused of all confidence, honour, and freedom. Alexej was the son of a highly placed Communist official who had been recently arrested. (77)

The allusions to the purges are there throughout *The Joke* to establish a contextual reading of Ludvik's appearance before the party functionaries. It can be read as a type of the purges, while at the same time it is made clear that the episode pre-dates the purges. If we object that the triggering episode of the joke postcard is not an adequate or representative example of the issues of the purges, the novelist can always reply that it is not about the purges, they were a later event; or he can reply that a novel about the purges in their full reality embodying what seems to be Kundera's less than enthusiastic vision of communism would not readily have found publication in Czechoslovakia in 1967.

There were no doubt tactical reasons for the fictional evasions Kundera employed. But other aspects of the strategies are perhaps more readily confrontable. Ludvik is provoked into sending the postcard by Marketa' s personality:

The events leading to my first major disaster (and, as a direct result of its uncharitable intervention, to my acquaintance with Lucie) might well be recounted in a detached, even lighthearted tone: it all goes back to my fatal predilection for silly jokes and Marketa' s fatal inability to grasp any joke whatsoever. Marketa was the type of woman who takes everything seriously (which made her totally at one with the spirit of the age); her major gift from the fates was an aptitude for credulity. Now, I am not using credulity as a euphemism for stupidity; not in the least: she was moderately bright and in any case young enough (nineteen, a first-year student) so that her trustful naiveté seemed more charm than defect accompanied as it was by undeniable charms of a physical nature. Everyone at the university liked her, and we all made more or less serious passes at her, which didn't stop us (at least some of us) from poking gentle, perfectly innocent fun at her. (22-23)

The age-old story: it was all the woman's fault. The sexism is

unavoidable. 'Everyone at the university liked her', we are told of Marketa, but the sentence continues with a definition,. implicitly but unambiguously, of 'everyone' as men: 'we all made more or less serious passes at her.' There are no lesbians in *The Joke:* there is no warrant for taking these as other than masculine passes. In the context of this unproblematical male point of view, the remark that 'Marketa was the type of woman who takes everything seriously' proclaims itself as part of that long tradition of anti-feminism, the woman who cannot see the joke. We might recall Chauntecleer, the backyard cock in Chaucer's *The Nun's Priest's Tale,* declaring to his hen companion Pertelote:

‘*In principio,*
Mulier est hominis confusio, -
Madame, the sentence of this Latyn is,
'Womman is mannes joye and al his blis.' (3163-6)

The joke being that Pertelote cannot see the joke because she doesn't understand the Latin tag: in the beginning woman is the destruction of man. It is a tag that takes its anti-feminism firmly back to the beginning of time in the Garden of Eden.

Ludvik's telegram is in this great tradition: the sophisticated intellectual cynicism, the scholarly allusions, the joke that the woman doesn't see as a joke. The intellectual sexism may seem at this early point of the novel, when Ludvik first describes the joke that leads to his downfall, to be only a minor part of what for him becomes a major tragedy in which the political over-interpretation of the postcard is foregrounded. But the note is resumed and resituated as a major part of his revenge attempt on Zemanek with the degradation of Helena: here the political is relegated to the periphery and the sexism foregrounded in the lengthy descriptions of the sexual encounter.

Once again, whatever the grotesque male behaviour, it is presented as the woman's fault. Ludvik, now rehabilitated to white collar status with a position at a research institute, is interviewed by a radio journalist, Helena, who Ludvik soon discovers is Zemanek's wife. 'I can't quite say it occurred to me then and there to get to know her as well as I eventually did. Far from it. The revulsion I felt the moment she entered the room was only intensified by the

discovery' (152-53). However, a possibility begins to take shape:

I kept thinking that her mouth, her breasts, her eyes, her hair, all belonged to Zemanek, and I mentally fingered them, held them, weighed them - testing whether they could be crushed in my fist or shattered against the wall - and then carefully re-examined them, first with Zemanek's eyes, then with my own.
Perhaps I did have a fleeting and utterly impractical Platonic fantasy of chasing her from the no-man's-land of our persiflage to the combat zone of the bedchamber. But it was only one of those fantasies that dash through the mind and leave no trace. (153-54)

The possibilities considered and rejected are brought into realization only because of the woman. 'Nothing would have come of the meeting had not Helena herself phoned a few days later and asked whether she might see me' (154). Although in the novel's second paragraph Ludvik has defined the morality of his scheme - 'the whole idea was so cynical and base' (26) - responsibility is now deflected from him. The blame, the initiating motivation is tactically moved from Ludvik to Helena. We are presented with yet another version of the 'women who are raped have asked for it' syndrome, that convenient moral evasion: the inviting victim, the willing complicit sacrifice.

What ensues is a blow by blow account of manipulation and humiliation.

We met at a cafe, and by way of provocation I skirted the issue of the interview entirely and ran down her professional interests at every opportunity; I watched her lose her composure, just what I needed to gain the upper hand. (154)

Ludvik describes the sexual politics of his behaviour with what is often called a 'disarming' candour: the literary strategy is that of privileging 'honesty' over 'decency'; by describing 'honestly' some hideous act, a moral superiority of truthfulness can he claimed. Ludvik's confession of his 'baseness' is tactical within this larger literary strategy.

Yes, I was struck by an acute awareness of my own *baseness;* it had taken me by surprise; but what surprised me even more was that it didn't horrify me, that I accepted it with a certain feeling of pleasure, no - joy, relief. (155)

The sexism is presented with this same would-be disarming candour:

The conquest of a woman's mind follows its own inexorable laws and all attempts at bringing her round with rational arguments are doomed to failure. The wise thing to do is to determine her basic self-image (her basic principles, ideals, convictions) and contrive (with the aid of sophistry, illogical rhetoric, and the like) to establish a harmonious relation between that self-image and the desired conduct on her part. (158)

Again the attitudes are 'classic'. Andrew Marvell's 'To His Coy Mistress' adopts the same strategies: presenting an argument often praised as 'logical', but in fact one of illogical rhetoric. If we had time we could delay love making; but we don't have time; therefore (and the therefore is purely sleight of hand rhetoric, not logic) let us make love at once. The praise of the woman is entirely hypothetical - if there were time I would spend it on you; which leaves the woman with the idea she has been praised. The illogic will be clear to the sophisticated, educated males, but supposedly not to women who were rarely given any philosophical training in the seventeenth century, just as in Chaucer's time they were rarely taught Latin so Pertelote could not understand Chauntecleer's 'joke'. Part of long-standing, monkish, intellectual antifeminism, this sexism that depends on a shallow, educated superiority has been endemic to western literary culture. Ludvik spells out its surviving principles in the continuation of the passage just quoted:

For example, Helena dreamed of 'simplicity', 'candour', 'openness' -ideals that clearly had their roots in the evolutionary Puritanism of an earlier time and came together in her mind with the idea of a 'pure', 'unsullied', highly principled, and highly moral man. But because the world of Helena's principles was based not on careful considerations but (as with most people) on a logical suggestion, nothing was simpler than to apply a crude

little bit of demagoguery and merge the idea of the 'straightforward man' with behaviour altogether unpuritanical, immoral, and adulterous, thereby preventing the desired behaviour (that is, adultery) from entering into traumatic conflict with her inner ideals. A man may ask anything of a woman, but unless he wishes to appear a brute, he must make it possible for her to act in harmony with her deepest self-deceptions. (158)

But the degradation does not stop at this simply elitist 'intellectual' contempt. It takes us beyond the campy mental superiority of Marvell's poem into a revulsion from the female body:

I put my hands on her knees and inched up her skirt until her stocking tops and garters came into sight, and a sad, pitiful sight they were on those already fleshy thighs. (162)

And the expressed physical contempt allows the sexism to take over unrestrained with the flip expression of a superiority of the male mind, the limitations of the female intellect:

For topics of conversation are not infinite, and husbands are the most gratifying topics for wives, the only topics in which they feel sure of themselves, the only topics in which they are *experts,* and people are always happy to have a chance to show off their expertise. (163)

With the sexist degradations well under way, the covert political is intruded. In the passages cited it will have been noticed how there is a leakage from Ludvik's contempt for womankind to 'people' generally: 'most people' do not base their principles on 'careful considerations' (158), 'people are always happy to have a chance to show off their expertise' (163). The elitist contempt that finds its ready expression in sexism opens up into a projection of its own empty nihilism, into a large scale political scepticism. The carefully insinuated reference to Stalin indicates the explosive significance of the politics carried in the sexism. The passage continues:

So as soon as I assured Helena it wouldn't upset me, she completely opened up on the subject of Pavel Zemanek and got

so carried away she didn't bother to paint in the dark areas and went on at great length and in great detail about how she'd fallen in love with him (the straight-backed fair-haired youth), how she'd looked up to him when he became the ensemble's political officer, how she and all the girls she knew admired him (he had a marvellous way with words!), and how their love story had merged harmoniously with the spirit of the time, in defense of which she also had several things to say (how in the world were we to know that Stalin had ordered loyal Communists to be shot?), oh, not because she wished to *veer off* into politics, but because she felt herself personally involved. The way she defended the period of her youth and the way she identified herself with it (as if it had been her *home*, a home she'd since lost) seemed almost like a challenge; it was as if she were saying, Take me, but with one proviso: that you let me remain as I am and accept my *convictions* as part of me. Making so much of convictions in a situation where body, not mind was the real issue is abnormal enough to demonstrate that the woman in question was to some extent traumatized by her convictions: either she feared being suspected of having no convictions whatsoever, or (as is more likely in Helena's case) she harbored secret doubts about them and hoped to regain her certainty by staking something of indisputable value in her eyes: the act of love (perhaps in the cowardly unconscious confidence that her lover would be more concerned with making love than discussing convictions). (163-64)

This reduction of Helena's intellectual and political integrity is not based on any sustained creation of character. It remains an abstract assertion, never tested in dialogue, never demonstrated. The passage is inserted amidst the episode of Helena's physical degradation at the hands of the novelist, between the 'pitiful sight' of her gartered stocking tops and the next classic tableau of male fantasy, the *dejeuner sur l'herbe* icon. '"Take off your clothes, Helena", I said quietly' (169). Not only does she take off her clothes while Ludvik remains dressed except for his jacket, but we are regaled with yet another male archetypal fantasy, the strip described item by item, skirt, sweater, slip, stockings, bra, panties. The unnecessariness of this itemized description, the realization that it is drawn out

prurience rather than clarificatory realism, is unavoidable when we consider Ludvik's account of how 'she unfastened the stockings and slid them down off her legs one after the other' (169). Try to take off stockings any other way than one after the other. And while Renoir's famous painting in all its grotesquerie at least paid some sort of ennobling tribute to the female body, here we are offered 'a blue vein bulged' (171), a 'face flushed and disfigured by a grimace' (172), and a comparably distasteful reaction to Helena's sexual and emotional satisfaction: 'It was awful' (173). While all the horrors of sadistic pornography are invoked in literary image - there but not there, the subtext that yet avoids the actualities of sadism while introducing the mental set: 'To rob Pavel Zemanek's sacred chamber, to ransack it, make a shambles of it!' (171).

Amidst the degradations of the female, the glories of machismo are naively reasserted. 'Then she told me she'd never known anything like this before' (174). The male superiority over the fooled woman is triumphantly proclaimed by the woman victim herself. Helena asserts 'the body has a foolproof instinct' (174), which once again affirms the grounds of male scorn and male contempt; her belief in that 'foolproof instinct' is but further evidence of her mental incapacity. It is certainly a further twist on the 'joke' that the intended degradation is interpreted by the degraded as a 'miracle' (174); but it is a twist that only endorses the empty machismo: not here the jokes of masculine impotence. Insofar as Zemanek and Helena no longer have any sexual relationship, Ludvik's revenge has failed:

there it was, a body I'd stolen from no one, in which I'd revenged no one, destroyed no one, a body abandoned, deserted by its partner, a body I'd intended to use but which had used me instead and was now rejoicing brazenly in its triumph, rollicking, reveling. (177)

The scheme may have misfired, nonetheless the male potency, the masculine vigour, is triumphantly if ambiguously victor. It is through the machismo of Ludvik's performance that the joke returns on him; the irony, the paradox of 'a body I'd intended to use but had used me' in no way cancels the preceding pages of degradation of the female. 'I stared with horror at her breasts flying

from side to side' (177). The fully established revulsion from the female body is not paralleled by a revulsion from male flesh; this is not a Swiftian recoil from the body in general but a contempt for the specifically feminine. The motive of degradation involved in Ludvik's intended 'use' of Helena cannot be identified with Helena's alleged 'use' of Ludvik for sexual fulfillment. The verbal paralleling is a sleight of hand attempt further to debase female sexuality. Everything is orchestrated for degradation. The ironic point of the revenge misfiring, had it been required only for its paradoxical effect, could have been there conceptually, off stage, in précis. But Kundera privileges the physical encounter as a major scene of the novel and no amount of attempted resituating it with irony or paradox can erase or redefine the degrading, distasteful, dehumanizing episode described with such visual particularity.

It might be objected that to dwell on Ludvik's personality and actions as anything more than an artistic study of morbid psychology, is to overinterpret. But Kundera himself has remarked to Ian McEwan how 'the same things that happen at the level of high politics happen in private life';

> People always see the political and the personal as different worlds, as if each had its own logic, its own rules. But the very horrors that take place on the big stage of politics, resemble, strangely but insistently, the small horrors of our private life. (32-3)

While it is not proposed to offer an allegoric reading of Ludvik's behaviour in political terms, or any other such schematic approach, it is worthwhile remarking how Kundera deftly establishes sufficient of a political context in which to read this seemingly private episode. Don Anderson notes: 'Kundera said of his now famous novel *The Joke*, "spare me your politics, *The Joke* is a love story" ... but in Kundera, politics, lust and love are never separate' (161). And Robert Boyers has discussed *The Joke* as a political novel.

For all Ludvik's proclaimed dislike of journalists - and Helena is a journalist - the establishing account of the provincial town and the 'welcoming of new citizens to life' ceremony (148) has all the note of the metropolitan journalist's glib superiority to the provinces, that contemptuous portrayal of 'the flat space' of the main square

whose history 'had engraved a set of irrevocably hideous features on its face' (1):

I gave the unsightly square a final sardonic glance, and, turning my back on it, set off for the hotel where I had booked a room for the night. The porter handed me a key hanging from a wooden pear and said, 'Second floor'. The room was not exactly attractive: a bed along one wall, a small table and chair in the middle, an ostentatious mahogany chest of drawers cum mirror next to the bed, and a miniscule cracked washbasin by the door. I put my briefcase down on the table and opened the window: it looked out onto a courtyard and the bare grubby backs of neighbouring buildings. I closed the window, drew the curtains, and went over the the washbasin, which had two taps - one blue, the other red; I turned them on; cold water trickled out of both. (2)

It is familiar territory to the western reader, that note developed by Orwell and Greene, reaching back into T. S. Eliot's 'vacant lots' of North American urban desolation, no doubt based on observation once, but observation now conforming to a mood of deracinated *angst.* The objective correlatives of alienation are deftly established.

Soon after leaving the hospital grounds, we came to a group of buildings jutting up fitfully one after the next from an unleveled, dust laden plot of land (without lawns, paths or roads) and forming a pitiful screen between the town and the flat, open fields in the distance. We went in one of the doors and climbed a narrow staircase (the elevator was out of order) to the third floor ... (4)

After the two, brief opening sections, the novel moves back in time some twenty years to the immediate post World War II society. The ramshackle seediness foregrounded in the opening allows a ready seepage into the war ravaged seediness of the reconstructing new society. The technique is a variation of the Orwellian; just as *Nineteen Eighty-four* projected forty years ahead the shortages and physical collapses of the war ravaged 1947 London of the writer's present time, suggesting a continuity of ruin and dilapidation under

English socialism (Ingsoc, as Orwell termed his party), so Kundera by his chronological disruptions is able to imply that the harsh physical conditions of 1947 have been perpetuated into the briefly evoked 1967. Whatever points of social criticism such a technique could make for the Czechoslovakian reader of 1967, who had the external reality of the society against which to read the novel, the western reader can all too readily and indeed unwittingly give an Orwellian reading: and assume, moreover, with the reissue of *The Joke* in the 1980s that such was the permanent condition of life in the socialist world. Such are the politics of translation.

To resituate the novel in the moment of its composition is to see these images as part of a familiar cinematic world: the provincial town and industrial wasteland of slag, mud, pylons and desolation so strikingly photographed in the English new wave cinema of the 1960s. *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* is the best remembered of that great period of achievement.

> I walked along the bank of a narrow path flanked on one side by a thick row of poplars. To the right of the path a mixture of grass and weeds sloped down to the level of the water, and across the river, on the opposite bank stood the warehouses, workshops, and courtyards of several small factories; to the left of the path beyond the trees there was a sprawling rubbish heap and, farther on, open fields punctuated by more metal pylons and high-tension wires. Making my way along the path, I felt I was crossing a footbridge over a broad expanse of water. And if I compare that landscape to an expanse of water, it is because, first, it gave me the shivers, and second, I was constantly on the verge of crashing down off the path. I was well aware that the nightmarish phantasmagoria of the landscape was merely a mel!lphor for everything I had tried not to recall after my encounter with Lucie; I seemed to be projecting suppressed memories onto everything I saw around me: the desolation of the fields and courtyards and warehouses, the murk of the river, and the pervasive chill that gave the landscape its unity. But I understood there was no escaping those memories; they were all around me. (22)

The other context in which to view Ludvik is that classic

European tradition of the outsider figure. Indeed though his expulsion from the communist party is the episode that decisively marks his separation from society, it is difficult to see in what way he ever was a communist. Of course, his accounts of his pre-expulsion past are mediated through his expelled and disillusioned present. Everything has been coloured by the ensuing experiences. But such account as he does give of his party membership consistently privileges his alienation even then:

It was the first year after February 1948. A new life had begun, a genuinely new and different life, and its features - they are imprinted upon my memory - were rigid and grave. The odd thing was that the gravity of those features took the form of a smile, not a frown. That's right, those years told the world they were the most radiant of years, and anyone who failed to rejoice was immediately suspected of lamenting the victory of the working class or (what was equally criminal) giving way *individualistically* to inner sorrows.
Not only was I unencumbered with inner sorrows; I was blessed with a considerable sense of fun. And even so I can't say I wore the joyous physiognomy of the times: my sense of fun was too frivolous. No, the joy in vogue was devoid of irony and practical jokes; it was, as I have said, of a highly serious variety, the self-proclaimed *historical optimism of the victorious class,* a solemn and ascetic joy - in short- Joy with a capital J. (23)

What provokes Ludvik's alienation? It is presented in terms of his having a different sense of humour, as the novel's title indicates. But the postcard that conveys the ultimate unrecognized humour is not. without its political aspect. The adapted quotation from *The Communist Manifesto,* the salute to Trotsky, invite a political decoding. The taunt is there, even if the basis of the taunt is absent, even if it is only a 'joke'. The absence, the specifics of political questioning, it can no doubt promptly be replied, were inevitably absent because inexpressible. The opposition Kundera now spells out to communism presumably could only be an absence in 1965 when the manuscript was completed for submission to a publisher.

Moreover, an implicit critique cannot be spelled out, otherwise the joke of the postcard will be read as having a developed

ideological position. And the consequence of that would be that Ludvik's expulsion will be seen as having a rationale and even a justification, rather than being an overreaching absurdity. There is an important ambiguity here. The joke of the postcard is presented as free of political opposition: merely a joke, for all its political terms. The over-reaction to the postcard is then read as a humorless political response, in itself the provocation and justification of political opposition. The political is then necessarily absent before the overreaction to the postcard; though the political terms of the postcard inevitably direct attention to this absence. And that very absence brings into question Ludvik's original stance; it is hard to see how he ever was a party member; there are no signs of communism in his thinking. But this absence, too, can be turned to serve its anti-communist purposes. It structurally reinforces the implicit case that party membership is motivated by empty careerism, authoritarianism, and such like non-communist attitudes. It is an approach running through the novel, which serves to depoliticize the party. Is this because the party has become so naturalized in Czechoslovakian life that what it represents in a distinction to what capitalism represents cannot even be conceptualized? Even in 1948? Or is it a depoliticizing strategy such as Orwell used in *Nineteen Eighty-four,* excluding political and social aims and replacing them with a preoccupation with 'power' - a depoliticization ultimately extremely political in its reactionary bent.

The political, then, is officially absent from *The Joke.* It cannot be the central issue. It is displaced to the margins and survives in hints and in the reader's interpretations, decodings and meditations on the peripheral. This, of course, did not fool anybody. Kundera writes in his preface to the new, authorized translation of the novel in 1982:

> The fate of the book called *The Joke* coincided with a time when the combined inanity of ideological dictatorship (in the Communist countries) and journalistic oversimplification (in the West) was able to prevent a work of art from telling its own truth in its own words. The ideologues in Prague took *The Joke* for a pamphlet against socialism and banned it; the foreign publisher took it for a political fantasy that became reality for a few weeks and rewrote it accordingly. (x)

What the novelist presents is not necessarily what the novelist endorses. Distasteful and discreditable modes of behaviour may be represented in order that their components may be examined, analysed and understood, so that in future life situations hopefully they will not be repeated. Though this, too, is not without its ambiguity: what the author presents as a distasteful subject for moral examination may well be read as a model for imitation: Milton's Satan, embodiment of political tyranny, becomes the hero for many in the Romantic age. The problems of critical response are made even greater in the mode that a novel like *The Joke* employs. As David Lodge describes the mode:

> both the three-day action in the provincial town, and all the analepses, are mediated to the reader not by a reliable, impersonal authorial narrator ... but through the interwoven monologues of four of the characters: Ludvik, Helena, Jaroslav and Kostka.
> These monologues do not pretend like those of Stephen, Bloom and Molly in Joyce's *Ulysses*, to record thoughts and sensations as they occur, but are rather what Dorrit Cohn calls 'memory monologues,' like those of the characters in Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*. They are cast in the past tense, and are linguistically too well-formed to imitate the 'stream of consciousness' in Joycean fashion; on the other hand, they are not naturalised as journal or diary entries, or as oral anecdote or deposition. They are *interior* monologues, though they do have something of the quality of confession. The characters seem to be telling their stories, the story of the last few hours, and the story of their entire lives, to some absent Other, or to themselves, to their own consciences, in an effort to understand, justify or judge their own actions. (114)

Initially, then, any critical rejection of the novel for its sexism, can be countered by the response: this sexism is Ludvik's world view, presented through his own consciousness. It is not necessarily endorsed: it is there for the reader critically to resituate. To identify Kundera's authorial stance with what we are given in the literary presentation of the character Ludvik's stance can be rejected as a naive reading. The mode seems to offer a pluralism - letting the

characters speak for themselves. But not all the characters are given monologues. Lucie, with whom Ludvik has an ongoing sexual relationship when working in the mines, is never allowed her say. Indeed, of the four who speak, only one is a woman.

It is not insignificant that Lucie is given no voice. Of course there are literary reasons for this. She is the ever exploited, the dumb victim, the voiceless underdog: woman and lower class. But is this literary tradition any more than a mode of bourgeois ruling class fantasy? Is it the case that the Lucies have no voice?

It is not only that Lucie is presented merely as the sex object with no voice in a novel that pretends to a pluralistic narrative mode. More than this, Ludvik and Kosta are given narratives that consist of quite considerable *interpretations* of Lucie. Lucie is created through their male narratives. Her silence and absence are not a true silence but a manipulated literary silence. There is no 'true' silence: the very concept is as much a literary fabrication as the manipulated silence we are offered. Ludvik tells us:

I simply could not get her to write to me. Perhaps I intimidated her with my own letters; perhaps she felt she had nothing to write about or would make spelling mistakes; perhaps she was ashamed of the awkward penmanship I knew only from the signature on her identity card. It was not within my power to make her see that I actually admired her awkwardness, her ignorance. I did not value her simplicity in an abstract way; I saw it as a sign of her purity, of a tabula rasa enabling me to make my imprint on her all the more profound and indelible. (67)

Kundera's mode allows the possibility that this is in part Ludvik's projection, a vision of Lucie that may be delusional. His fantasy that 'she was a country girl and I was the first man to see her naked' (92) is undercut by Kosta's account later of Lucie's earlier sexual 'initiation' by the gang of boys - an account that might also have been a fantasy, or so Ludvik speculates. But though Ludvik's speculations about Lucie's not writing may be projected illusion, they are reinforced by the parallel account of the language of flowers.

There were flowers waiting for me every time we met, and in

the end I gave in, disarmed by the spontaneity of the giving and its meaning for the giver. Perhaps her tongue-tied state, her lack of verbal eloquence, made her think of flowers as a form of speech - not the heavy-handed imagery of the conventional flower symbolism, but an older, vaguer, more instinctive *precursor of language;* perhaps, having always been sparing of words, she instinctively longed for a mute, preverbal stage of evolution when people communicated with a minimum of gestures, pointing at trees, laughing, touching one another ... (68)

The elitist fantasies of Ludvik's, this conviction of class superiority and gender superiority, is not something that can be disregarded. It is not confined to Ludvik but is endemic to the novel. The denial of Lucie's own narrative reveals the novelist's manipulations. Kundera privileges the old bourgeois archetype and presents Lucie as the silent inexpressive. Yet the very literary mode Kundera uses - as Lodge's reference to William Faulkner reminds us - is one whose earlier revolutionary achievement had been to give voice to those denied voice, to allow the mute inglorious Miltons to move from their class-suppressed role and achieve a verbal, a literary expression. That was Faulkner's humane genius. As P. N. Furbank puts it: 'It is an obvious point, yet one worth making, that the device of "interior monologue" militates against social absolutes and works strongly in favour of egalitarianism, indeed almost compels it' (137). But as with all literary revolutions, the technical break-throughs are rapidly appropriated for reactionary purposes. Kundera's voices are elite, educated, literate, male.

Of the four narrative voices, the one woman (Helena) has a mere sixteen of the 267 pages. Now this comparative refusal of the female voice might in some circumstances be seen as a mark of a male novelist's integrity; to simulate the female voice would be false, would be claiming an unjustifiable insight into woman, would be once again male supremacist. In this novel of seemingly multiple narration, however, this hardly seems to be the case. There is a token female voice, but the dominant mode is of male voices expressing male fantasies. And the male fantasies are no less male fantasies for being disarmingly presented as male fantasies.

Why does she always were those black high heels?

I told them I'd bought them for her to wear when she was naked; she was shy about it, but did everything I asked of her, I kept my clothes on till the last possible moment, and she would walk up and down in front of me in those heels (how I loved seeing her naked when I was dressed!) and then go over to the cupboard, where she kept the wine, and, still naked, fill my glass ...
So when Lucie came up to the fence, I wasn't the only one looking at her; I was joined by ten or so of my fellow soldiers, who knew precisely what she was like when she made love (what she said, how she moaned) and who would make all kinds of innuendos about the black heels she had on again, and picture her parading naked in them around her tiny room. (92)

Ludvik goes on to refer to 'the feeling of friendly solidarity that had led me to paint so detailed a picture of Lucie's nakedness and erotic behaviour' (92). But this is not a true solidarity. It is a voyeuristic provocation, a fantasy titillation with any actuality of solidarity excluded. 'I was not the least bit upset by the obscenities they used each time she appeared at the gate; they could never act them out (the barbed wire and dogs protected her from all of us, myself included)' (92). The represented episodes of 'solidarity', of sexual sharing, are presented with revulsion. The episode with the blonde, not dignified with any named identity, could have been a type of sexual sharing; indeed it is for Ludvik's two fellow miners. Ludvik, however, recoils in horror:

the blonde soon became voluble and said to Honza, 'Hey, I bet you wouldn't lend me a hundred crowns,' whereupon Honza slipped her a hundred-crown note and she opened her coat, hitched up her skirt, and pulled down her panties. She took my hand and pulled me towards her, but I was scared and broke away from her, pushing Stana into the breach; Stana showed no qualms whatsoever and moved right up between her legs. They lasted less than twenty seconds together. I planned to let Honza have his turn next (partly because I was trying to play the host, partly because I was still scared), but this time the girl was more determined and pulled me against her hard, and when, aroused by her caresses, I was finally ready to oblige her, she whispered

tenderly in my ear, 'I only came along because of you, silly,' and began to sigh, and all at once I genuinely felt she was a nice girl in love with me and worthy of my love, and she went on sighing, and I went at it with abandon, but suddenly Honza came out with some obscenity, and again I realised I wasn't in love with her in the least, so I pulled away from her without climaxing, and she looked up at me almost frightened and said, 'Hey, what's going on?' but by then Honza had taken my place, and the sighs started up again. (51-52)

Instead of the solidarity heralded by the bottle passed from hand to hand - 'all four of us drank from it' (51) - we have class separation, revulsion. Ludvik makes explicit his attitude in describing the encounter with another unnamed sexual object, 'a woman whose monstrous height had earned her the nickname Candlestick. She was ugly, but what could we do?' (52). 'It all seemed revolting and pointless' (52) Ludvik remarks. 'Had I perhaps felt the stirring of some moral principle? Nonsense: it was revulsion, pure and simple' (52-53). Revulsion is the keynote, a revulsion experienced by Ludvik, an inner emotion, but projected through his narrative onto the women encountered. Women become the objective correlatives of his mood, bearing the burden of his revulsion.

The revulsion from sexual sharing is reinforced in the later narrative by Kostka of Lucie's sexual 'initiation' (196). Again the incident is presented negatively, this time with an added brutality and violence. 'There were six of them and one of her' (195), the section opens. But for all that note of concerned compassion, the reader who enjoys representations of male sexual violence on women is well provided for. The plangent rhythms of Kostka's narration add to the pornography of cruelty by evoking associations of sacrificial suffering, a heightened aura of religion and fine art. The communal aspects are brought into the foreground here through the Christian terminology that is used to characterize Kostka's narration.

She spread her legs. She was afraid - she knew what it meant - but did as she was told. Then she screamed, and the blood gushed out of her. The boys roared, raising their glasses, pouring the sparkling rotgut down their leader's back, all over her body,

between their legs, and bawling vague phrases about Christening and Initiation, and then the leader stood up from her and the next member of the gang went over and took his place, and so it went on in order of seniority ...' (195-96)

The Joke is structured on a series of parallels and contrasts, linked images and episodes. The paralleling of these two sexual episodes serves to exclude a third possibility. Revulsion and coercion (Lucie is slapped hard across the face when she attempts to refuse the sixth boy) are the presented poles; shared, equal participation is excluded. The parody of Christian communion serves to add a quasi-blasphemous note to the presented sexual episode; it insists on degradation as the key note, the degradation of Christian imagery serving as further metaphor for the degradation of the sixteen year old Lucie. But the communion imagery is also there to be degraded in itself; any idea of communion - social, religious or sexual - is presented negatively. This denial of communion, of equal sharing, is the note of the novel's sexual politics. All the male fantasies of hierarchy, authority and power over the submissive, degraded or debased woman are rehearsed. Rape, seduction of the stupid, purchase of the prostitute, and trickery comprise the enacted sexual events.

The denial of a voice to Lucie in the novel's polyphony is the sexism of exclusion, of absence. The final treatment of Helena, however, is all too present. The sexual humiliation of Helena, mediated through Ludvik's account, might possibly be claimed as dramatized evidence of Ludvik's sexism. But what Lodge calls 'the humiliating consequences of Helena's overdose' (115) cannot be so easily accepted. The tablets she takes in her suicide attempt turn out to be laxatives, the potential tragedy becomes excretory farce. And this humiliation of Helena is narrative, not interpretive . It is achieved by the novelist's plot, not by his character's perhaps critically represented point of view. And once again the humiliation is given full visual representation:

There before my eyes, on the wooden seat, in the stench of the latrine, sat Helena. Pale, but alive, she looked up at me in terror and instinctively tugged at her skirt. but despite her best efforts she couldn't even bring it down to the mid-thigh region, and

holding on to the hem with both hands, she squeezed her legs tightly together. (250)

Tragedy is denied. Helena survives. But this is not a case of a positive ending emerging. There is nothing positive in Helena's humiliation. Jaroslav also is saved from death at the novel's end; he suffers a heart attack, but survives. And similarly survives in no positive way:

And what I said to myself was although he would probably get over it, as the second fiddle had predicted, he would lead a very different life, a life without passionate devotion, without jam sessions, a life under the watchful eye of death, and I was struck by the thought that a person's destiny often ends before his death and Jaroslav's destiny had come to an end. (266)

The note is one of futility. There is humiliation here, too; Jaroslav 'looked up at me and said it had all happened because we'd stayed, he hadn't wanted to stay' (266). The cimbalom ensemble, playing in the open air restaurant, is unable to hold the attention of the new generation:

Meanwhile, the audience had undergone a gradual metamorphosis: the half-empty tables of people following our performance with enthusiasm from the start had been taken over in large part by a crowd of young people (perhaps from the village, more likely from the town) who ordered beer and wine (at the top of their voices) and were soon (as soon as the alcohol had time to take effect) indulging their uncontrollable need to be seen, heard, recognized. (263)

The role of folk music has been one of the continuing themes of *The Joke.* At the novel's end it is presented as having no living role for the new generation of young. Nothing is shown as having any role. The nihilism is omnipresent.

The nihilism is there in the way Kostka's Christianity is derided. It is presented with that easy 'exposure' of Christianity as sublimated sexuality: the presentation is in itself quite unsublimated, nakedly explicit:

One day I asked her whether she believed in God. She
responded in a way I considered peculiar. She said neither yes
nor no. She shrugged her shoulders and said, 'I don't know'.
I asked her whether she knew who Jesus Christ was. She said she
did. But she didn't know a thing about Him. Only that He was
somehow connected with the idea of Christmas. It was all a haze,
a few chance images that made no sense together. Until that time
Lucie had known neither faith nor doubt. I suddenly felt a
moment of vertigo, something akin to what a lover must feel
when he discovers no male body has preceded his in his beloved.
(192)

That Kostka can explicitly consider 'that all my talk of Jesus and God was no more than a cover for the most carnal of desires' (200) in no way makes this age-old derision of Christianity any less a cliché. To have the Christian figure considering this offers a variation on the old formula, but it is nonetheless an old formula, as old as the anti-feminist formulae we have already noted. We might recall Swift's account in *The Mechanical Operation of the Spirit* in which sublimated sexuality issues in sectarian enthusiasm. Swift's target was both mechanist reductionist rationalism, and mechanical (i.e. working class) radical sectarianism. And so with Kundera, it is the radical Christian, the practising Christian, who is the target for destabilization. The state's opposition to the church that causes Kostka to lose his job can be seen by western bloc readers as evidence of the evils of communist intolerance of freedom of speech and worship. But how then do we interpret the novelist's discrediting of the Christian impulse? Indeed Kostka later re-interprets that pressure from the state:

And what was the real reason behind my voluntary resignation
from the university fifteen years ago? I didn't love my wife. She
was six years older than I. I couldn't stand her voice any more
or her face or the monotonous tick-tock of the family clock.
I couldn't live with her, but neither could I inflict a divorce on
her, because she was a fine woman who had never done anything
to hurt me. And suddenly I heard the saving voice of an appeal
from on high. I heard Jesus calling me to forsake my nets.
(206-7)

This undercutting of Kostka's Christianity, presenting it as but the ideology of sensuality, may be seen as a sop to official attitudes of the mid-sixties. But it is just that Christianity that is in accord with communism, that radical practical primitive Christianity as represented in Kostka's life of cooperation and sharing that Kundera chooses to undercut. Kundera offers nothing on the reactionary aspects of the church, its authoritarian, hierarchical structures, its privileging of church buildings, bricks and mortar, wealth. Kostka's sexual 'hypocrisies' in no way undercut the practical effects of the radical, loving and charitable aspects of primitive Christianity.

The Joke leaves us with a vision so sceptical of human possibility that it is effectively nihilistic. This is not just to remark the lack of positives. The confrontation and denial of the values of socialist realism may have been the conscious strategic stance, the aesthetic challenge. But the consequence is a consistent degradation of human values. We may feel sorrow for sacrificial victims like Lucie; but it is something other than dignity to be the object of sorrow. The young are especially derided; Helena's would-be lover, his pimples and constipation presented as marks of his contemptibility, the absconding folk king off to the motorcycle races, and the whole wave of youth who disregard the cimbalom recital. This might seem remarkable in a young man's novel – Kundera began writing it in 1962 when he was thirty-three, he tells us (v). But Kundera's hostility to the young has its political base. He told Olga Carlisle in 1985:

‘My scepticism in relation to certain values that are almost totally unassailable is rooted in my central European experience.
‘For instance, youth is usually referred to not as a phase but as a value in itself. When they utter this word, politicians always have a silly grin on their faces.
But I, when I was young lived in a period of terror, and it was the young who supported terror, in great numbers, through inexperience, immaturity, their all-or-nothing morality, their lyric sense.’ (16)

At the same time, the past is presented in *The Joke* as equally absurd. The preserved folk ceremony is allowed nothing of value.

The Joke

I was prepared for the lack of taste, I was prepared for the alliance of true Folk art with kitsch, I was prepared for overblown speeches by idiot orators, yes, I was prepared for the worst in bombast and hypocrisy, but what I wasn't prepared for was the sad and almost touching *shabbiness* of it all ... (217)

The wildflower beauty of Jaroslav's dream is not an adequate substitute for humanity: 'A wild rose bush appears before me on the verge. It is covered with tiny roses. I stop, enraptured' (105). The respect for ordinary, daily human activities characteristic of eastern European movies, recurrent scenes of domesticity like preparing meals presented with a respect for the dignity of everyday labour, is here denied. Instead we have Jaroslav' s smashing of the kitchen. The strength of socialist art, the value-bearing bases of its humanism, are here confronted and rejected. Pretty well everyone in the novel is presented as feeble, failed or fraudulent. This may be a satisfying vision of Czechoslovakian life for the western anti-communist but in the totality of the nihilism the question inevitably raised is, Can it be true? The excess of negativity ultimately explodes this bitter tale.

Isaac Singer's Stories

There is no doubt about the achievement of Isaac Bashevis Singer. He is one of the foremost story-tellers of our time. His output has been prolific and *The Image* (1986), published in his eighty-second year, is a collection of a further twenty-two stories gathered from twenty years of magazine publication. Translated from the Yiddish sometimes by the author himself, sometimes by or in collaboration with others, they nonetheless have a consistency of tone. It would be hard indeed to speculate which come from the mid-sixties, which from the mid-eighties. The same personality runs through all of them, that same love of storytelling.

It is tempting to write 'genial' of the personality but that would be to disregard the sometimes rebarbative note that reveals itself. For beneath the unpretentious, effortless seeming surface of these stories is a firm, calculated attitude of mind. The 'Author's Note' makes it clear that there is a combative, even embattled stance from which these so natural, so accessible stories issue.

In the years I have been writing I have heard many discouraging words about my themes and language. I was told that Jewishness and Yiddish were dying, the short story was out of vogue and about to disappear from the literary market. Some critics decided that the art of telling stories with a beginning, middle, and end - as Aristotle demanded - was archaic, a primitive form of fiction. I heard similar degrading opinions about the value of folklore in the literature of our times. I was living in a civilization which despised the old and worshipped the young. But somehow I never took these dire threats seriously. I belong to an old tribe and I knew that literature thrives best on ancient faith, timeless hopes, and illusions. (vii)

Singer has always stood out against the lures of modernism. The strength of his stories is the strength gathered from returning to the

living sources of story-telling: not to some past asserted source, but to that continuum of storytelling that still goes on when people tell their life stories, gossip, illustrative anecdotes to each other. What we hear in his stories is the voice of the story-teller, not only the professional writer Singer, though he is always there, but the amateur, natural story-teller who comes to the writer with an episode to tell. The basis of Singer's humanity lies here, in the recognition that everyone has a story to tell, and not just one story, but a multiplicity. And so a frequent framing situation of *The Image* is of someone meeting or phoning the writer and then launching into a narrative. 'Advice' opens:

In the years when I worked at a Yiddish newspaper in New York, giving advice, I heard many bizarre stories. (3)

Sometimes this need to unburden stories is presented as something to be resisted:

I often receive telephone calls from readers who assure me that they have a true story that would shock me. Usually I get rid of such propositions with any kind of excuse. ('A Telephone Call on Yom Kippur'). (235)

Though the point is never spelled out, it is clear that Singer, the Rabbi's son who trained at the Rabbinical Seminary in Warsaw but became a secular writer for the Yiddish press, is re-enacting the listening, advice-giving role of his father. Many of the stories come from episodes overheard when a child. 'The Divorce' begins:

Many divorce cases were handled in my father's court. The court was nothing more than our living room, where my father kept his religious books and the ark for the Torah scrolls. As the rabbi's son, I never missed an opportunity to listen in on the petitioners who came for a divorce. Why should a man and a wife, often parents of children, suddenly decide to become strangers ? I seldom got a satisfactory answer.’(58)

And then there are the stories of times long past that Aunt Yentl tells, stories that draw on the infinite resources of oral history and

that merge into the world of the folk tale.

My Aunt Yentl and her cronies were talking about love, and Aunt Yentl was saying, 'There is such a thing as love. There is. It even existed in former times. People think that it's new. It is not true. Love is even mentioned in the Bible.' ('Strong as Death is Love'). (70)

For all the opening polemic against that modernism without narrative, that lack of beginning, middle and end, Singer's conservatism is not a blind refusal. He is not in this a reactionary. That self-referential nature of modernism, art aware of and concerned with its own processes, is not absent from Singer's work.

There are frequent stories about stories, stories about writers. The Warsaw Yiddish Writers' club is a frequent setting or departure point in this as in earlier works. Indeed the themes revolve as much around the behaviour and contradictions of writers as around Jewishness. In this regard Singer has absorbed one of the dicta of modernist realism: writing about what you know, the romantic heritage of writing about what has personally been experienced. In reaction to that awful authorial confidence of the great nineteenth-century writers who so proclaimed a knowledge of everything, a vast social comprehensiveness, these stories consistently attest their personal authenticity, the directly vouched for. If not what happened to the narrator, they are what happened to people the narrator has known; or stories told to the narrator by people he has met. In his memoir *Love and Exile,* Singer stressed the importance of suspense.

I yearned for some of the suspense found in the works of Balzac, Victor Hugo, Tolstoi, Dostoevski, Flaubert, Alexander Dumas, and Strindberg. Yiddish and Hebrew literature both suffered from a lack of suspense. Everything in them centered around some yeshivah student who had gone astray, sought worldly knowledge, then suffered the consequences at the yeshivah or at his in-laws'. But I had already grasped the fact that suspense was the essence of both life and art. Mere description wasn't enough. What was needed was tangled situations and genuine dilemmas and crises. A work of fiction had to draw in its readers. (130-1)

All of his fiction has this strong narrative surge, this wondering what will happen next. 'Impassioned narrative art' as his 1978 Nobel Prize citation put it. But it is not a naive suspense. The old narrative tricks have become over familiar to the experienced reader. It was in reaction to that exhaustion of the old techniques that modernist writers had to look for other strategies; but in abandoning suspense and narrative they lost their readers to television. Singer, for all the seeming simplicity of his narratives, is not unsophisticated. In 'A Telephone Call on Yom Kippur' there is, as often in these stories, the dual perspective of the writer and of the visitor who tells the writer the story. The initial suspense is the writer's anxiety that the visitor will never get to the point, the suspense of wanting it all over and finished. 'I'm corning to the point,' (237) the visitor assures him on the third page. 'But wait, the story is only beginning,' (239) he says on the fifth. 'Now the real story begins,' (240) he promises at the end of the sixth. The ghostly mystery of the dead woman answering the phone that leaves the visitor wiping his forehead and shaking holds no surprises for the writer. 'He sat there pale, pondering his own tale. I said, "Helena was alive, eh?"' (245). These old tricks of suspense are not the rationale of the story. They are still there, they are still functional: without them we would end up with modernist stasis. They carry us along but we know them, they are less matters of surprise than matters of familiarity. No longer privileged as the point of the story, no longer the plot excitement we rush towards as we still do in a thriller, they take a gentler role so that the more numinous qualities of what is narrated can be dwelt on. It is nice to know how we travel through the story - to see the automobile carrying us, to know its make and style as it were, but we don't need the high speed chases, the flashy gravel-showering halt, the all too familiar zig-zag down Lombard. The narrative suspense is now appropriately subordinated, but not elided altogether.

Not that Singer is without the bolder, fearful narrative strokes. 'One Day of Happiness' tells of a young girl who having given herself to be deflowered by a Polish officer-poet slits her wrist on her return to her parents:

Sitting on the toilet bowl in the dark, Fela leaned her head against the wall, ready to die. She could feel the blood running

from her wrist and she was bleeding below, too. (30)

'Strong as Death is Love' concludes with a man so in love with his dead wife that he exhumes her decayed body and is found in bed with her skeleton. 'The Secret' tells of a woman who conceived by her husband's apprentice and years later finds the child and the apprentice have met and fallen in love: 'My daughter lives with her father. He is her lover. They are planning to marry!' (171).

The dominant tone is not as sensational as these abstracted plot details might suggest, however. For Singer's concern is not in the horror, but in the human complexities that the narratives reveal. Violent action and physical cruelties he generally avoids. That constant agonizing about nature, God, meaning, suffering, cruelty that Singer describes in his autobiographical memoir as a child runs through these stories, providing the impetus, the wondering why. A consistent note of his writing is a recoil from the cruelties of man to man and of man to the natural world. Herman in *Enemies:A Love Story* was always planning to become a vegetarian: Aaron in *Shosha* did become so. In *Love and Exile* Singer describes his own shift to vegetarianism from a revulsion from taking life. In the author's note to his novel, *The Penitent* he writes:

I'm still as bewildered and shocked by the misery and brutality of life as I was as a six-year-old child, when my mother read to me the tales of war in the Book of Joshua, and the bloodcurdling stories of the destruction of Jerusalem. I still say to myself that there isn't and there cannot be a justification either for the pain of the famished wolf or that of the wounded sheep. (168-9)

In a world saturated in acts and images of violence, Singer's stories provide a rare, compassionate relief.

The strong narrative drive that is one part of his achievement is not something existent purely for itself. Drawing the reader in, it is Singer's technique for unfolding reality. The replication of reality, not any self-regarding mannerism, is Singer's aim. And the realism has a splendid amplitude. The stories in *The Image* range from contemporary New York apartment life to late nineteenth-century Polish aristocratic estates; from the poorhouse and the gaol to the Rabbi's court; from the Warsaw Yiddish Writers' club of the 1920s

and 30s to modern Israel. But Singer is not confined to a limited material reality. His scope is something that comes with his occult interests. One of the few contemporary writers to offer us a larger world of spirit, he unobtrusively suggests these further dimensions, cosmic reaches, spiritual interminglings, the interface of the spirit world with ours. And the spirit world is unaffectedly part of his realism. As real as the slums of Krochmalna Street or the subway system of Manhattan, it is introduced not to shock or surprise, not for the artificial frisson of the ghost story, but as a natural component of our life. Capturing Jewishness in its cabalistic speculations, this concern with the spirit world widens out into a rendering of those further spiritual dimensions, something not limited to the folklore or arcana of a specific creed or race. The occult both amplifies the realistic picture of Polish and expatriate Jewry, and also offers a wider subject matter in itself.

This occultism is not confined to those stories that deal thematically with dybbuks, astral bodies, clairvoyance and suchlike. These themes are present - in 'The Enemy', 'The Image,' 'Miracles' - though sometimes problematically. At the end of 'The Image' it is doubted whether the image of the title is a denizen of the spirit world or a psychological projection, something even harder to deal with. 'A dybbuk talks, screams, howls, wails and therefore he can be exorcised. Melancholy is silent, and therein lies its uncanny power' (310). Singer's occultism is not something reducible to psychic phenomena, but part of a larger world view. The stories enact his belief in the microcosm-macrocosm, that vision that each individual contains in microcosm the forces and tension of the macrocosm. No matter how small the object on which we focus - the single community, the couple, the individual, the atom - it embodies the same forces of the cosmic whole. In the close focus on the claustrophobic settings of closed family life, of compacted tenement slums, of the prison cell, is embodied - looked for properly and interpreted correctly - the grandeur of creation: and the wretchedness, the suffering, too. They open out, these tiny episodes that are never yet miniatures in that usual dismissive sense: they always have this cosmic potential. This is a quality of Singer's stories that comes not from a secular literary art but from a world view. The stories, with their extraordinary accessibility, their open immediacy, their seeming artlessness are compact seeds, ready

to grow and blossom into fulfillment, meaning. They are not overworked jewellery or embroidered artifacts but spontaneous perceptions of animate life. And this is Singer's greatness as a short story writer. The dissatisfactions that so many readers feel with story collections, with a bundle of discrete episodes, either unconnected or arbitrarily linked, produce all too readily the response, So what ? Nothing is revealed. But Singer's stories have this larger resonance. For all their range of settings and historic moments, their moods of comedy and horror, resignation and disillusion, published together they comprise a coherent totality. It is tempting to say that Singer has a wonderful source of material. The traditions of Hebraism, the upbringing in the Rabbi's household with its mystical volumes - something so beautifully evoked in his memoir *Love and Exile* - provide a wealth of material both contemporary and historic. But this is to underestimate Singer's very real achievement in bringing these materials to life again. Is Singer's source in fact any richer than anyone else's source? Isn't all life a rich source? Isn't it in fact a mark of his creativity that he gives the impression of a marvellous fund of material, though we can only get such an impression from what he has created of it? The creativity is so rich, the story telling so fertile, that we then postulate a pre-existent pre-formed source. The genius of the stories is that they imply this rich totality, but it is only brought to life through the stories themselves. And even if we say, these are but stories transcribed from a rich culture whose members have told him their tales, again what an immense creativity is glossed over in that 'but'. The art lay in hearing the stories, in finding them, in capturing the pattern in the circumambient world in such a way that that whole world is then illuminated.

Singer's main subject is sex. Sometimes it is with love, sometimes without; sometimes it is with marriage, sometimes with divorce. As he wrote in *Love and Exile:*

I had made up my mind a long time ago that the creative powers of literature lie not in the forced originality produced by variations of style and word machinations but in the countless situations life keeps creating, especially in the queer complications between man and woman. For the writer, they are potential treasures that could never be exhausted, while all

innovations in language soon become clichés.

The Image has tragic tales of young girls seeking yet failing to find the satisfactions of love and sexuality ('One Day of Happiness', 'The Mistake', 'The Image'), tales of momentary transgressions or near transgressions that result in cataclysmic religious consequences ('The Pocket Remembered', 'A Nest Egg for Paradise'), recurrent tales of adultery, divorce and remarriage. 'Confused' in which a writer returns from a lecture tour with its series of one night adventures and gets himself immediately enmeshed with three women is a contemporary tale of New York craziness that in brief recapitulates the structures of Singer's earlier novels *Enemies* and *Shosha.* There is a pattern here of multiple affairs and multiple deceptions that owes as much to the repetition compulsions of biography - the same structure of affairs can be found in *Love and Exile* - as to any fictional imaginings. It is all done comparatively tastefully; there are no four-letter words, none of the remorseless physical detail of Henry Miller's comparable cavortings. Singer's erotic themes are presented less with sensuality than as drives and compulsions. But whereas Miller was able in his excess of physical detail to break through to a self-awareness, was able to demystify male delusions for himself and his readers, Singer's decorum holds back from that abyss and effectively endorses these tales of duplicity and the double standard.

It has never been easy to write about sexuality. To present the ambiguous behaviour, the graspings and deceptions and delusions, requires a considerable selflessness in those writers who draw on their own experiences. The danger has always been that the presentation of the problematic, of disturbing behaviour that needs to be displayed to be able to be analysed and understood and hopefully to be corrected in future practice, will be read as somehow endorsing what is shown and advocating its replication. While on the other hand it is all too easy to take a simply censorious attitude to presented incidents, refusing to see that the author has built into the narration an apparatus of criticism and assessment. Singer raises enormous problems in this area. His story 'The Bond' is about one of those 'cases when a man is forced to slap a woman' (32). Reuben Berger's girlfriend is a victim of 'insane jealousy' which issues in 'fits'. 'One thing alone could stop her delirious

outbursts - slaps. I was forced to slap her repeatedly, and this immediately brought her to her senses' (33). Berger goes off to give a lecture without telling her and she finds him on the train, becomes hysterical but after he slaps her becomes 'a quiet and humble lover' (35). The slap is observed by the librarian who is to introduce the lecture; she meets Berger in his hotel room, abuses him for his behaviour, and 'I began to slap her just as I had Bella in the train' (38). This slapping forms 'The Bond' of the title. The story ends 'Sometimes I suspect that what happened between us was the closest contact she ever had with a man' (40). The story is carefully framed, narrated by Berger to the story-teller, so any identification with Singer's point of view is thereby prevented. But it remains nonetheless a vicious and dangerous piece, and the strategy of framing it in no way exonerates Singer from the responsibility of reproducing it. This is the sort of story that encourages, indeed creates, those violent and destructive sexist attitudes in impressionable young, and not so young, males; it presents a confirmation of that terrible archetype of the way to deal with a hysterical woman is to slap her.

Literature rarely records stories telling us what to do with hysterical men, of course. Hysteria and responding to being slapped in a positive way are all part of sexist typology, like 'nymphomania.' In 'Remnants' Zina's 'first husband, the lawyer, said openly that his ex-wife was a nymphomaniac' (103). The expression is in reported speech, so is not necessarily endorsed by Singer; yet there are no comparably dismissive terms in his stories for the many males who are presented as sexually active. For all the humanity that is expressed in these stories, there is a consistent current of disabling sexism. Though there is nothing quite as structural in them as in the cataclysmic triggering episode of *The Penitent.* There the protagonist, after overhearing a quarrel between his mistress and her pregnant daughter in which the daughter reveals the mistress has another lover, goes off home in the middle of the night to find his wife is having an affair with her college professor. It drives him to Israel and religion, he divorces his wife and marries a virgin.

The sexuality of Singer's fiction is very much a male sexuality. Insofar as this reveals and demystifies male delusion and fantasy, it can be positive and cathartic. But there is an undeniable reactionary edge. Machla Krumbein, the sexually liberated writer in 'The

Interview', is presented as a grotesque, and, the ultimate insult, a bad writer. There are certainly male writers who are presented as irredeemably bad, but they are generally disabled in some further way: Heisherik, in 'Why Heisherik Was Born', is a peasant, Mark Lenchner, in 'Advice', is 'a well-known writer and a Communist, whose wife had tried suicide three times because of his constant betrayals' (4). In 'Remnants' not only is the philandering Benjamin Rashkes' last novel rated as 'the worst kind of mishmash' (115), but it is the 'nymphomaniac' Zina, his ex-lover, who is promoting it and who wants the narrator to write an introduction for it. And Zina is one of a recurrent type in Singer's writing, the Jewish girl who has become a communist. There is Tamara in *Enemies*, Dora in *Shosha,* Zena in *Love and Exile.* Politically in implacable opposition to them, Singer is nonetheless fascinated by these women. Indeed this is noted by the American consul when he applies for a visa in *Love and Exile*:

The consul had received information from someone that I was having an affair with a leftist woman and he asked, 'How is it that you come to be involved with such individuals?'
I was overcome by a silly sense of frankness and I countered his question with another: 'Where else can you get free love?'
The interpreter laughed, and after she had translated my response, laughter broke out among the other officials.
This answer, like all my others, was not true. Many of the so called bourgeois girls were already far from being chaste. The only difference lay in that the bourgeois girls weren't interested in some Yiddish scribbler who was a pauper besides. They sought doctors, lawyers, or wealthy merchants. They demanded to be taken to the theater, to cafes. Neither was I interested in their banalities. With Lena at least I could have discussions, dash her hopes for a better world. To her I was a cynic, not a *schlemiel.*' (215)

But these political discussions find no place in Singer's stories. 'The Conference' deals with 'a cultural conference. Actually, it was an attempt by the Party hacks to create a united front with various leftist groups' (204).But the politics are absent, the manoeuvres of Comrade Flora's fending off sexual propositions the foregrounded

subject. The ideas of socialism and communism are never confronted by Singer, though his consistent opposition to them is firmly enough established. Stalin is equated with Hitler, but what communism involves is left unexplored. That the cold war paralleling of Hitler and Stalin begs more questions than it answers seems not to worry him. His rejection of radical politics goes back to the 1920s. And though there is much about the disillusion of those Polish communists who went to the Soviet Union in the years after the revolution, the explicit debate of ideas is something that for Singer has no place in fiction. In *Love and Exile* he wrote of Romain Rolland's *Jean Christophe* and Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain*:

Both these works represented long essays spiced with description. Neither Jean Christophe nor Hans Castorp were living beings but mouthpieces through which the authors spoke. Both books lacked the suspense and vitality that great literature evokes in a reader even if he is a simple soul. These were works for intellectuals seeking a purpose, a sum total, a cross section of culture, an indication for the future, and other such fine things that no art (and actually no philosophy) is capable of supplying. These were works for critics, not readers. They bored me, but I was afraid to say so since all so-called aesthetes had seized on them as if they were treasures. Already then I realized that there was emerging in the world the kind of reader who sought in a book not the synthetic but the analytical. They dissected the books they read and the deader the corpse, the more successful the autopsy. (134-5)

But if the political is avoided, if that realism that issues in socially meaningful observation and analysis, like Gorki's, is rejected, then something has to take its place. If work cannot be foregrounded - and what experience of the work-place does the professional writer have? - then what remains? The preoccupation with sexuality and the occult in Singer's work is an inevitable consequence of his political exclusions. And the conservative nature of those exclusions and choices inevitably permeates the sexual attitudes.

Despite all this, and for some readers that is despite quite a lot,

Singer's stories retain their appeal. That there are issues to disagree with is not in itself something to be condemned, but a welcome mark of content. Singer's conservatism, even if contentious, is certainly not evasive. At the point when late or post modernism, having lost its non-professional readers, now loses confidence in its own processes, when the foregrounded manner fails to allure and seems only an advertisement for the absence of anything to say, the unpretentious manner of these traditional stories endures.

Appendix: Fiction as a Political Vehicle

Of the various sorts of evidence available for political, economic and social conditions, fiction is one of the most available and accessible. Fiction can be written or read for a variety of motives and purposes; but out of this variety there has always been the impetus of finding out what this or that environment, lifestyle or experience would be like, both historical and contemporary. When Daniel Defoe wrote *The Life and Adventures of Robinson Crusoe* (1719) and *The Fortunes of the Famous Moll Flanders* (1722) both novels purported to be true accounts of shipwreck, prostitution. But though Defoe based Robinson Crusoe on the true life experiences of Alexander Selkirk, the interest of the novel soon spread from the details of survival to the portrayal of the protestant, bourgeois colonizing consciousness. As Ian Watt wrote in *The Rise of the Novel*

> *Robinson Crusoe* has been very appropriately used by many economic theorists as their illustration of *homo economicus*. Just as 'the body politic' was the symbol of the communal way of thought typical of previous societies, so 'economic man' symbolized the new outlook of individualism in its economic aspect. (65)

Christopher Caudwell, one of the earliest English Marxist literary critics gives classic expression to this reading of the novel.

> *Robinson Crusoe* is a bourgeois epic, as significant in its way as *Paradise Lost*. Like it, it is an unconscious parable of the bourgeois position, as if Defoe had read Marx. Robinson Crusoe on his island, absolutely alone and completely free, yet calls into existence a bourgeois world. Even the exploited proletariat is there in the person of the ignorant, good-natured Man Friday, and as the bourgeois always dreams, there is no overt domination in their relationship - Friday is exploited in the best paternal manner. (*Romance and Realism*, 57-8).

There is, then, immediately a complication. What the fictional work purports to be evidence of, it mayor may not be evidence of: it may be

evidence of something else equally or more significant. From Ricardo, from Marx's comment in *Capital* (Moscow, 1974, I 81) to Pierre Macherey in *A Theory of Literary Production Robinson Crusoe* has been continually cited and interpreted and reinterpreted for its social and economic significance.

Literature is a transmitter of human consciousness, a record of data, and is as much a source of evidence as history or statistics. But like history and statistics, literature does not offer some pure, value free, objective evidence. Literature in a class society embodies class values, despite attempts of bourgeois critics and academics to claim enduring absolutes of eternal aesthetic value. The modes of production of literature determine what can be said, how information can be conveyed, and determine too the exclusions; the works that are denied publication, or are obliterated from our history. The interpreting activity of the critic and educationalist is no less ideological.

A writer who deals with political and social and economic materials is dealing with materials about which he or she has a political stance. So the evidence the text presents is of the author's ideological presentation of the socio-political materials - not just or separately the sociopolitical materials themselves. The work on establishing the author's ideological stance and class affiliations has rarely been done in the academic subject of English Literature; the conservative orientation of the 'discipline' has preferred to enshrine and espouse 'purely literary values'.

But some work has been done, and any use of literary materials for evidence in studies in political economy or history needs an awareness of this interpretative context . The critical discussions may often seem remote from the original fictional texts. But those texts no longer exist in a hypothetical pre-critical purity. *Robinson Crusoe*, Macherey insists, 'is not simply an adventure story but the instrument of an inquiry, the theme around which an ideology has been progressively established' (241).

Immediately, then, 'interpretation' intervenes. It is not possible simply to offer a list of texts and say, these are works of literature that illustrate and illuminate socio-political-economic issues. Insofar as works do illustrate and illuminate such issues, they are part of an ongoing ideological debate, and they are enlisted as evidence for now this position, now that position, sometimes explicitly, sometimes covertly. It is not possible to return to a position of innocence, naivety with literary works; the comments of critics and historians have already

reinterpreted and de constructed the original texts; some of the interpretations are forgotten, others have been accepted in full or part by scholarly, academic and educational institutions and are taken as the actuality; that there was any reconstruction has been forgotten. To rail against this is futile, this is all part of literature; to try to fix the reading, the single, final and immutable reading of a text is absurd, to see the printed book as an object of finality, rather than as part of a communication process. To talk about, to discuss, to interpret, to argue about a literary work is part of the experience of the literary work. Literature is part of a consciousness battle - not only in what the writer writes, and the sources and influences that determine his writing, but in the uses and interpretations made of his writing by readers, critics, commentators. The interpretations themselves are part of the literary evidence. They mark ideological shifts. The reams of disinformation are of the nature of the battle. The critical disputes may seem as remote and absurd as the disputes Jonathan Swift records in *Gulliver's Travels* (1726) about whether high or low heels should be worn or whether eggs should be broken at the big or the little end; but these absurdities, it is important to realize, were Swift's rewriting of the very real political, social and economic conflicts of the English Revolution; the reduction of them to trivia was the ideology of the Augustan ruling elite, attempting to depoliticize the events of recent history, to discredit sectarian, radical commitment.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF A SELF-CONSCIOUS TRADITION

'The liberal superstition that in political and social questions there is such a thing as pure, unmanipulated truth seems to enjoy remarkable currency among the socialist left' Hans Magnus Enzensberger writes in 'Constituents of a Theory of the Media' (*Raids and Reconstructions: Essays in Politics, Crime and Culture*, Pluto, London, 1976, 26). But once the existence of manipulation is recognized, it is possible to proceed to use the literary materials as evidence. The novelist most admired by Marx and Engels was Balzac. And Balzac's *Lost Illusions* (1837-43) is an essential fictional study of nineteenth century literary production - encompassing the writer, publisher, critic, lobbyist, printer,paper-maker, patron, financier and police, analysing the material base of bourgeois art, exploring the conspiracies and manipulations, involving 'every feature of the capitalization of literature' as George Lukacs wrote in his brilliant essay on the novel in *Studies in*

European Realism:

'Thus the ultimate integrating principle of this
novel is the social process itself and its real subject is the advance and
victory of capitalism. Lucien's personal catastrophe is the typical fate of
the poet and of true poetic talent in the world of fully developed
capitalism.' (53)

To read *Lost Illusions* is part of a beginning to use literary evidence; it examines what literature is in the society of finance capitalism, it demystifies the concept of literature as pure 'art', understanding it as part of commodity production and of consciousness manipulation and control. Fifty years later Guy de Maupassant in *Bel Ami* (1885) examined the world of metropolitan journalism, of the newspaper established to aid its owner's financial speculations, of the political manipulations and lies, of the co-option of the literati. And Jack London's autobiographical novel *Martin Eden* (1909) based on his working class childhood and early manhood in San Francisco and his encounters with bourgeois ideology and the literary machine, offers an American extension of these materials. These novels about the literary process in all its social and economic ramifications are basic to any use of literature as social evidence.

The economic and social determinants of' contemporary literary production are examined in Richard Kostelanetz's *The End of Intelligent Writing* and J. A. Sutherland's *Fiction and the Fiction Industry*. There are two useful surveys of the English novel written from a progressive socio-historical perspective, Arnold Kettle's *An Introduction to the English Novel* and Raymond Williams' *The English Novel From Dickens to Lawrence*. But the social background of English writers has not been much examined. Raymond Williams devotes a chapter of *The Long Revolution* to 'the social history of English writers.' Working class writers are proportionately few, and evidence of working class conditions presented in literature is mediated through generally bourgeois perceptions.

THE NATURALIST/REALIST TRADITION

Naturalism, the mode developed by Emile Zola and the writers associated with him in late nineteenth century France was a mode of supposedly objective scientific observation of sociological and economic conditions; its orientation, both in the background and life styles of its practitioners

and in its intended readership, was middle class. *Germinal* (1885) dealt with the appalling conditions of the miners, *La Terre* (1887) with the peasantry.

In England the classic, authentic, less external representation of working class life is found in D. H. Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers* (1913), an autobiographical account of life in the mining district of the north-east midlands. His *The Rainbow* (1915) deals with the alienations of English middle-class life - gentlemen farmers, mine managers, teachers, army officers; its sequel *Women in Love* (1921) deals with the alienation of the upper-middle class intelligentsia, Bloomsbury and the mine-owners. *Kangaroo* (1923) has the DHL-based protagonist considering the rival claims in Australia of socialist and fascist ideologies. Alan Sillitoe is the foremost English recorder of working-class life in mid-century; *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (1958), his first novel, dealt with working class factory life, and the stories in *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner* (1959) further explored this milieu from the authentic basis of lived experience. His *Key to the Door* (1961) offers a conspectus of English working-class life from the depression through to the U.K. anti-communist war in Malaya in the 1950s.

Both Raymond Williams in *The Country and the City* and Jack Lindsay in *Decay and Renewal* draw attention to a comparatively forgotten writer, Lewis Grassic Gibbon, whose trilogy *A Scots Quair* (written 1932-4) 'stands out clearly as one of the few crests of achievement in the English novel of the 30s. Its noble picture of the destruction of a peasantry gains with the years' (Lindsay, 167). Another neglected work of the 1930s, WaIter Greenwood's *Love on the Dole* (1933) gives a first hand account of the depression in Manchester and Salford. And perhaps the most famous of all English novels of working class life is Robert Tressell's *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists* (1914). Nigel Gray has written a useful survey of the 1950s and 60s material in *The Silent Majority: A Study of the Working Class in Post-War British Fiction*.

Realism and naturalism are the modes most favoured by historians for evidence. But realism and naturalism are only two of the available modes, and are no less arbitrary, formalized and 'unreal' than other modes. I have argued in *Political Fictions* that 'a dissatisfaction with realism can be seen throughout the fictional productions of this century. *News from Nowhere, The Iron Heel, We, Brave New World, Animal Farm, Nineteen Eighty-four* constitute far more than a peripheral departure from a central 'realism'. The search in political fiction, as in all fiction, is for the appropriate, expressive form. From Morris's analysis of realism in *News from Nowhere* to Brecht's running argument with Lukacs, the limited nature of

realism has been demonstrated. 'Realism' is a particular formalism – partial, historically based, class-determined. Its name claims a totality and finality that as a form it does not possess. It is but one mode among many, and no longer the mode which those progressive writers concerned with political and social issues would automatically choose.

IMAGINARY WORLDS

Portrayals of society in its political, social and economic aspects, it needs to be stressed, are not restricted to realism or naturalism. Utopias, anti-utopias, science fiction fantasies, modes more experimental than the dominant realism of the late nineteenth and twentieth century, have been particularly attractive to writers of a political, social vision. The future projections offered extensions of contemporary trends in industrial capitalism - as in the work of H. G. Wells; and they offered the negation of contemporary conditions in an attempt to indicate what a communist or socialist society could be like - as in the work of Edward Bellamy or William Morris. Importantly, these projected futures offer a critique of contemporary conditions; they are all fictions written in response to perceived crises in capitalism.

Bellamy and Morris have a further interest in that their works are evidence for the development and transmission of a radical consciousness. Their works were explicit and immensely popular propaganda for the labour movement; they were issued in cheap and accessible editions that were circulated throughout the movement and influenced generations of unionists, socialists and Marxists, with their concrete visions of a possible society to strive towards. Their works are not only accounts of future societies created in negation of existing conditions, but they were also political instruments that determined the later development of radical thought. They are not only 'evidence' but they were also active interventions.

Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward 2000 - 1887* (1887) describes Boston, Mass., in the year 2000 A.D. under highly efficient industrialized state socialism. Bellamy's argument was that the monopolistic movement of late nineteenth century capitalism would result in an ultimate systematization into one total state monopoly, capitalism handing over 'absolutely without violence.' As a model for how a socialist society could operate with a basis of co-operation instead of competition, and as an argument for non-violent change, *Looking Backward* was an immensely influential book on the union and labour movements in the USA, UK and Australia - where it was serialized in the Brisbane

Worker under William Lane's editorship from its first issue in March 1890. Bellamy wrote a sequel, continuing the narrative and adding further social detail, called *Equality*.

William Morris reviewed *Looking Backward* in *The Commonweal*, the paper of the Socialist League, 22 June 1889. Bellamy's

> temperament may be called the unmixed modern one, unhistorical and unartistic, and it makes its owner (if a socialist) perfectly satisfied with modern civilisation, if only the injustices, miseries and waste of class society could. be got rid of; which half change seems possible to him. The only ideal of life which such a man can see is that of the industrious professional middle-class man of today, purified from the crime of their complicity with the monopolist class, and. become independent instead of being as they are now, parasitical.

The passage is quoted in A. L. Morton's 'Utopia Yesterday and Today' in his *The Matter of Britain*. Morton has written a valuable historical survey, *The English Utopia* ranging from medieval to modern times. He has also edited William Morris's *Political Writings*, a valuable collection of Morris's lectures on society, Marxism and art, and he has edited *Three Works by William Morris* which reprints *The Pilgrims of Hope* (1886), *A Dream of John Ball* (1887) and *News from Nowhere* (1890).

Morris wrote *News from Nowhere* in recoil from Bellamy's future vision. Morris found Bellamy's regimented 'machine life' hideous, argued in his review that 'variety of life' was as much an aim of true communism as equality of condition, and wrote his alternative projection of communist England at a stage when the state has withered away and the basically agricultural society is self-managed by local groups. After the revolution, machines were abandoned on a large scale because they had been designed for commodity production rather than for use of creativity. Morris projects a society in which production for production's sake will have stopped. Jack Lindsay in *William Morris: His Life and Works* explores Morris's social thinking:

> If Marx was right, a genuinely new society can be born only when commodity-production ends, and with it division of labour, money, market-systems, and alienation in all its many shapes and forms - above all the alienation from nature. Morris is one of the extremely few thinkers who have tried to realise at all fully what

such a situation implies. It certainly implies the end of all systems of production for production's sake (which repose finally on the need for capital to renew and multiply itself); it implies a situation where all poverty has indeed been abolished, but above all where men are able to understand just what they do need in order to live a truly satisfactory life as the good animals of an accepted earth. In the world where commodity production has ended, we have neither maximum production nor zero-growth; we have instead a society where people, freed from fear, are able to realise how little they need in order to achieve fulfillment and happiness. These problems are now beginning to come up for us all, not as the philosophical problems they were from Marx and Morris, but as problems of necessity in a world where men seek to make an infinite use of finite sources of energy and productive materials.

Other important studies of Morris include E. P. Thompson's *William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary* (1955; 2nd edition, Merlin, London, 1977), which is discussed in Perry Anderson's *Arguments Within English Marxism* (Verso, London, 1980), and Paul Meier's *William Morris; The Marxist Dreamer* (1972; Harvester/Humanities Press, 1978).

In contradistinction to *Looking Backward, News from Nowhere* stresses that the change only came about through violent Revolution, projected from the Bloody Sunday incident (13 May 1886) when police and soldiers attacked a peaceful demonstration in Trafalgar Square, killing three demonstrators and wounding 200 more. The demonstration had been in protest of the killing of six demonstrators when police fired on a strike demonstration in Chicago.

The Chicago episode resonates through Jack London's *The Iron Heel* (1907); the novel ends with an abortive rising, stirred by agent provocateurs, of a Chicago commune, and its subsequent massacre in a projected future 1932. London postulated that the monopolies would fight to the end to resist socialism, and would institute an iron heel of repression for a further four centuries:

Out of the decay of self-seeking capitalism, it was held, would arise that flower of the ages, the Brotherhood of Man. Instead of which, appalling alike to us who look back and to those that lived at the time, capitalism, rotten-ripe, sent forth that monstrous offshoot, the Oligarchy.

Too late did the socialist movement of the early twentieth century divine the coming of the Oligarchy. Even as it was divined, the Oligarchy was there - a fact established in blood, a stupendous and awful reality. Nor even then, as the Everhard Manuscript well shows, was any permanence attributed to the Iron Heel.

The novel's socialist hero Ernest Everhard offers a Marxist analysis of nineteenth and twentieth-century capitalism in the U.S.A. The narrative - a manuscript written by his wife - describes the socialists' political campaign, their harassment, framing, gaoling and subsequent underground war against the plutocracy up till 1932. The 'manuscript' is annotated from the perspective of the 26th century when capitalism having at last collapsed of its own contradictions has been succeeded by the Brotherhood of Man, a superefficient state socialist society.

London is generally remembered for his animal stories and tales of adventure in the Yukon and Pacific. *The Iron Heel*, unavailable for years, was reissued by Journeyman Press, London (1974) who also reissued his reportage on English working class life in the East End of London, *The People of the Abyss* (1903) with an introduction by Jack Lindsay, and *Revolution: Stories and Essays* selected by Robert Barltrop (1979). Barltrop has written a life, *Jack London: The Man, the Writer, the Rebel* (1976) which covers the materials from a socialist perspective but concedes too much to the bourgeois literary critiques of London's writings. London's time travel novel *The Star Rover* (1915; also known as *The Jacket)* and his novel of prehistoric mail, *Before Adam* (1906) are informed with a Marxist-Darwinian social vision. Philip Foner has a useful selection of London's work together with a lengthy introduction, *Jack London: American Rebel* (1947). Foner is also author of *Mark Twain: Social Critic* (1958).

IMAGINARY WORLDS: PROJECTION AND ANTI-UTOPIAS.

Within the genre of future projections, the anti-utopias or dystopias of H. G. Wells, Aldous Huxley and George Orwell are the best known. These are the writers whose work is on the educational syllabus. Wells wrote a number of alternative scenarios for the development of society on the lines of monopoly capitalism and class struggle - notably *The Time Machine* (1895) and *The Sleeper Wakes* (1899). *In The Days of the Comet* (1906) offers a

naturalistic account of working and lower-middle class life (the subject of Wells' naturalistic fictions in *Kipps* (1905), *Ann Veronica* (1909), and *The History of Mr. Polly* (1910) in the days prior to an apocalyptic world war, and a future projection of a just society beyond it. Christopher Caudwell places Wells' class position and perspective in 'H. G. Wells: A Study in Utopianism' in his *Studies in a Dying Culture* (1938).

Most literature departments and many history and political science departments that use literary materials represent Aldous Huxley and George Orwell on their courses or reading lists. But both these writers, though often imagined to have liberal or even radical leanings, represent the ruling-class response of one-time imperial England.

Only someone who has never been a worker can portray 'workers' as 'workers' - as externally and distantly viewed indistinguishable stereotypes. The patrician perspective of Orwell and Huxley is embodied id the way they present societies composed of anonymous workers - the proles in *Nineteen Eighty-four*, the deltas in *Brave New World*. People only look that way when envisioned from a different, alien class perspective. It comes from assuming that people who do hard and menial tasks can be characterised by those tasks and can be assumed to have no other qualities, no individuality; both Huxley and Orwell create futures in which the proles, the bred workforce, are seen and treated as animals or automata. This tells us something about the thinking of the mid-century English ruling-class literati. In both novels the thinking, questioning, protagonist comes from a class other than the workforce. These are bourgeois myths for a bourgeois readership.

Brave New World (1932) projects a totalitarian system of control based on commodity production and consumption and biological conditioning - test-tube babies bred as workers, technocrats etc; the society is maintained by drug control - soma - and breeding so there is no need for the Orwellian violence. As a critique of free-enterprise capitalism and as an indication of scientific methods of control, Brave New World had its impact. *Island* (1962) represents Huxley's later thoughts on the topic, here postulating a remote Pacific island community looking for a middle way between multinational exploitation and communism - psychedelic mushrooms now a positive in the society rather than the negative soma of *Brave New World*. (N20, laughing gas, seems to have been the consciousness changing force in Wells' *In the Days of the Comet*).

Nineteen Eighty-four (1949) follows - and indeed helped also to create more forcefully - the cold-war line of its period. It projects a future England in which fascist totalitarianism and socialist totalitarianism are presented as identical; the ideology of the ruling Party, Big Brother's Party,

is 'Ingsoc.' Orwell always denied he meant English socialism. But that was the meaning that was read and promoted. The novel projects an England of perpetual commodity shortages, a society separated into Inner Party, Party members, and proles. The 1930s demoralized defeated working class, the London Blitz, and the austerity of post World War II England are here frozen into a permanent future condition. The theory of the society is expressed in excerpts from the imaginary book, Goldstein's *Theory and Practice of Oligarchical Collectivism*:

> The primary aim of modern warfare (in accordance with the principles of doublethink, this aim is simultaneously recognized and not recognized by the directing brains of the Inner Party) is to use up the products of the machine without raising the general standard of living. Ever since the end of the nineteenth century, the problem of what to do with the surplus of consumption goods has been latent in industrial society. At present, when few human beings even have enough to eat this problem is obviously not urgent, and it might not have become so, even if no artificial processes of destruction had been at work. The world of today is a bare, hungry, dilapidated place compared with the world that existed before 1914, and still more so if compared with the imaginary future to which the people of that period looked forward.

Power now lies in the hands of the new class of bureaucrats, whose imperative is not money or culture or justice or anything at all but power. The proles are presented as brutalized with alcohol, uneducated, inert.
It is still possible to interpret Orwell's intention in this positively - as, for instance, Paul O'Flinn does in *Them and Us in Literature*:

> Orwell knew that the future was not inevitably socialist as Fabians used to believe. He knew with Engels that there's a choice - socialism or barbarism. At a time when the working class seemed stalled and revolutionary organisations didn't exist barbarism seemed likeliest, so he wrote to warn. It's still a valid warning. Either we build the socialism that Orwell believed in or they build the 1984 that Orwell was afraid of. (20).

But the portrayal of the proletariat has its other implications, as Raymond Williams points out in his excellent study *Orwell*.

He projects an enormous apathy on all the oppressed: a created mood, if ever there was one. Eighty-five per cent of the population are seen as an apathetic mass, and proles, as a description of them, seems more than Party jargon. The Party sees them as 'natural inferiors ... like animals', but how does Orwell see them? As a shouting, stupid crowd in the streets; drinking and gambling; 'like the ant, which can see small objects but not large ones'; 'people who have never learned to think.' It is the world of working people, before 1914, as seen by the prep-school boy' (78).

And Williams continues

It needs to be said, however bitterly, that if the tyranny of 1984 ever finally comes, one of the major elements of the ideological preparation will have been just this way of seeing 'the masses'. (79)

Orwell's fiction was an active intervention in the battle of consciousness.

By viewing the struggle as one between only a few people over the heads of an apathetic mass, Orwell created the conditions for defeat and despair. (79).

Much of Orwell's 'leftism' now looks like a pseudo-leftism, proclaiming a left-progressive orientation, yet in detail after serving the interests of reaction. His *Burmese Days* (1934) describes his early life as an Imperial policeman; he resigned, but later spent the World War II years broadcasting imperial propaganda to India. His account of working class conditions, *Down and Out in London and Paris* (1933) and *The Road to Wigan Pier* (1937) are inevitably imbued with this imperialist Etonian perspective. *Homage to Catalonia (*1938) attacked the communists in the Spanish Civil War from an 'anarchist' line. *Animal Farm* (1945) was an anti-communist, anti-Soviet union fable. Both Huxley and Orwell drew heavily on Eugene Zamyatin's novel *We* (1925), which in its turn drew on Wells and London. Set in the 26th century it projects not London's Brotherhood of Man but an oppressive, controlled, mathematically precise and organised future society, criticized from a romantic, anarchic standpoint; the first of the satires on the planned society of the soviet union.

FASCISM, ALIENATION AND IMPERIALISM

Evidence for social, political and economic conditions can be drawn not

only from novels of working-class life or from radical future projections. These are basic sources since the political and economic data are part of their thematic concerns. Similarly a politically conscious conservative writer will present accessible political and economic evidence. Hence Marx's admiration for Balzac. From Morris, London, Bellamy to Wells, Zamyatin, Huxley and Orwell is a whole spectrum of political ideology. Jameson's study of Wyndham Lewis, *Fables of Aggression* offers some valuable social insights into Lewis's proto-fascism. The novels of Louis-Ferdinand Celine, beginning with *Journey to the End of The Night* (1932) and *Death on the Installment Plan* (1936) are full of socio-economic observation, carrying through to his account of the collapsing Third Reich, seen from within, in later novels like *North* (1960):

The real iron curtain is between the rich and the down-and-outers ... between people of equal fortune ideas don't count ... when you take a good look, your opulent Nazi, an inhabitant of the Kremlin, directors of Gnome et Rhone ... they exchange wives, traipse around the same golf courses, buy and sell the same helicopters, and open the hunt together ...

In the U.S.A. the inheritor of much of the Celine tradition is William Burroughs whose *Junkie* (1953) is an acute exploration of the social role of heroin - its economic and its control functions; Burroughs' later fantasy works continue this exploration of alienation and control - (*The Naked Lunch* (1959), *The Soft Machine* (1961) and *Nova Express* (1964).

Imperialism and colonialism, though basic to England's economy, were displaced to a peripheral role in English literary production. The pantheon of accepted 'literary' texts of Dickens and George Eliot, Thackeray, Meredith, Hardy and James do not deal directly with the experience. It was left to the adventure story writers like Rider Haggard and particularly to the boy's adventure stories of G. A. Henty. But Rudyard Kipling brought up in India, offers the major literary record of the Indian imperial episode. And Joseph Conrad, a Pole who took on English nationality, wrote in *Heart of Darkness* (1899) the most powerful account of imperialist exploitation in the late nineteenth century Congo; though a conservative writer - *Nostromo* (1902) offers a conservative overview of political and economic revolutionary change in South America - *Heart of Darkness* provides in its material evidence as radical a critique of imperialism as Mark Twain's equally important attack on Belgian colonial policy in *King Leopold's Soliloquy* (1905). Jonah Raskin's *The Mythology of Imperialism* is an important account of the writings of Joyce Cary, Conrad, E. M. Forster, Kipling and D. H. Lawrence

in this area. Lucien Goldmann's *Towards a Sociology of the Novel* offers a structural study of the novels of Andre Malraux dealing with western imperialism and revolutionary change in China.

AN AUSTRALIAN TRADITION

Australian literature as an academic subject has generally followed the depoliticized, desocialized close-reading approach of English studies. The historian Russell Ward used the folk ballads as the basis for tracing the historical origins and development of *The Australian Legend* (1958) and he has edited an anthology, *The Penguin Book of Australian Ballads* (1964). Humphrey McQueen's *A New Britannia: an argument concerning the social origins of Australian radicalism and nationalism* (1970) which took issue with Ward, used the literary figures Bernard O'Dowd, A.H. Adams, Henry Lawson, Banjo Paterson, Christopher Brennan, C.J. Dennis and William Lane as basic to his argument.

Lane's novel set at the time of the maritime and shearers' strikes in the early 1890's, *The Workingman's Paradise* (1892) is a vivid, first-hand account of the beginnings of the labour movement and the women's movement in Australia. The story of the radicalization of a Queensland shearer, it offers some of the earliest and most memorable pictures of Sydney's slums, the radical speakers in the Domain, the unemployed and homeless sleeping out, and Paddy's market.

The street market was a central episode in novels of working class life, as P. J. Keating shows in *The Working Classes in Victorian Fiction* (1971). He traces the set piece back to Charles Kingsley's *Alton Locke* (1850), a novel Lane excerpted in The Worker and included in *The Worker* book exchange – a library of socialist literature made available to Australian unionists in the 1890s. The literary titles comprised *Looking Backward*, Kingsley's *Alton Locke* and *Yeast* (1851), Olive Schreiner's *Story of an African Farm* (1883) George Bernard Shaw's *An Unsocial Socialist* (1883) and Ignatius Donnelly's *Caesar's Column* (1889). Amongst those affected by Lane's radical propagandizing was Henry Lawson - Hilton Barton argues for a major influence in 'Lawson, Lane and "Mateship "' (*Communist Review*, 244 April 1962). Contemporary critical orthodoxy has been for the new left to deny the radicalism of Lane and Lawson, and to argue Lawson was so racist and nationalist as to be fascist; while the conservatives have dropped Lawson's explicitly social and political work from notice. Not only is much never anthologized, but what does appear follows the conventional enough critical practice of using the later, revised texts of a story or poem, rather than the text of first publication. Much of Lawson's work was written for

radical and union papers - including Lane's *Worker* - and the texts were altered when collected in later editions. Lawson may have wanted to remove what became a dated topicality, or may have wanted to tone down his radicalism in the climate of political repression that followed the defeat of the 1890's strikes; or it may be that some publishers' editor made the emendations, changing lines, cutting stanzas. The reader looking at the text for its socio-economic-political meanings would need to know the original published version; indeed, to be aware of both texts to see the political and cultural changes. Colin Roderick's edition of the poetry (3 vols. 1967-9) notes the originals as variants, so the original readings are accessible - but the anthologies are generally obscure on these matters. In parallel with this textual depoliticization, there has also been a direction of attention away from the socio-political, indeed the establishment of a polarization between the political (which meant radical) and the aesthetic. G. A. Wilkes' essay 'The Eighteen Nineties' (in Grahame Johnston ed., *Australian Literary Criticism*, 1962) gives classic expression to this position which finds the strength of Lawson and Joseph Furphy's *Such is Life* (1903) not in their political, radically committed aspects but in what 'transcends' their age and environment. John Docker has looked at some of the socio-political implications of academic orthodoxies on the 1890s in two pieces in *New Literature Review*, 6 - 'University Teaching of Australian Literature' and 'The Politics of Criticism: Leon Cantrell and the Gloom Thesis', in part provoked by Cantrell's useful anthology *The 1890s* (1977).

Both the radicals and the nationalists claimed Lawson and Furphy as the originators of their Australian tradition, founders of the realist tradition in Australian fiction. Jean Devanney, Katherine Susannah Prichard and Vance Palmer were seen as the inheritors, and Jack Lindsay's essays on Prichard, Palmer, Barbara Baynton, Alan Marshall and Frank Hardy in *Decay and Renewal* offer a good introduction to the socialist realist line of Australian writing. David Walker has offered a more critical account of the limitations of the social democratic assumptions of Palmer, Louis Esson and Furnley Maurice in *Dream and Disillusion* (1976).

Another novel regularly cited for its recording of social conditions in lower class Sydney is Louis Stone's *Jonah* (1911), and Christina Stead's *Seven Poor Men of Sydney* (1934) is a powerful account of poverty and politics in the first quarter of the century. Stead's *For Love Alone* (1944) also offers valuable social materials on 1920s Sydney, *House of All Nations* (1938) deals with Parisian banking in the 1930s, and *Cotter's England* (1967) deals with English working class life and politics in the 1950s.

There has been a growing attempt to examine the ideological formations of Australian cultural positions in John Docker's *Australian Cultural Elites* (1974), Tim Rowse's *Australian Liberalism and National Character* (1978) and Ian Reid's *Fiction and the Great Depression in Australia and New Zealand* (1979). Jack Beasley's *Red Letter Days* (1979) offers an inside account of the Australasian Book Society and the realist writers movements in relation to Alan Marshall, Frank Hardy, Judah Waten, Mary Gilmore, Les Haylen and Gavin Casey. Beasley's monograph *Socialism and the Novel: a Study of Australian Literature* (1957) is a pioneering work with a useful checklist of 'Australian Literature of Significance. '

Finally, it is important to point out, 'high art' literature is not the only or necessarily the best source of literary evidence for political, social or economic materials. Stephen Knight's *Form and Ideology in Crime Fiction* (1980) discusses Edgar Allan Poe, Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes stories, Agatha Christie, Raymond Chandler and Ed McBain, exploring the socio-political meaning of their chosen forms. And Frank Kofsky's *Lenny Bruce: the Comedian as Social Critic and Secular Moralist* (1974) offers a socio-political reading of the great satirist, whose work has been edited by John Cohen in *The Essential Lenny Bruce* (1975).

Happy reading.

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